

# **eartrip**

**issue 4 - august 2009**



**Report on Ornette Coleman's Meltdown Festival**

**The Second Eartrip MP3 Compilation Album**

**John Russell Interview**

**Reviews**

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By David Grundy.

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One of the leading lights on the contemporary British free improvisation scene, guitarist John Russell to make fascinating music and is also an important organizer: his Mopomoso evenings, currently held at the Vortex in London, provide vital opportunities for old combinations to pick up the conversation where they left off, and for new groupings to generate new creative sparks. This interview covers his many projects over the years, including collaborations with Japanese free jazz musicians such as Toshinori Kondo, and the creative processes behind his playing. Interview by David Grundy.

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## EDITORIAL



Sadly, this editorial has to open with news of another death – no, not Michael Jackson’s, that of bassist Hugh Hopper. I guess the interview I conducted with him for Issue 2 may have been the last he gave, so maybe that will serve for tribute. There’s also a review of the re-issue of his album ‘Hopper Tunity Box’ in this edition of ‘eartrip’; on that album and on many others can be found the evidence of a spirit of adventure that continued right up to the end; along with fellow Soft Machine musicians like Elton Dean, he demonstrated the ability to mix experimentation with a genuine popular appeal, without compromise.

In any case, Issue 4 is now here, and as well as all the usual reviews and articles it’s accompanied by a second MP3 compilation – response was positive for the first, which went out with the previous issue, so I’ve put together another, again combining work by disparate performers in varying fields which can’t easily be bracketed under any one heading, but which share a spirit of adventure and exploration that – I think – outweighs the chance that the risks taken won’t pay off. Hopefully the eartrip compilation can become a regular thing: if anyone reading this has recordings they’d like to see on the next one, please email or post them to the addresses at the bottom of the editorial. It’d be great if I could continue to get a diverse selection of material, to showcase artists both better and less-known.

Other news, other thoughts: the re-appearance of the Freedom of the City festival this year, at a new venue after the stalwart back-room of the Red Rose pub decided to close the improv side of affairs, is surely cause for celebration, and the combination of veteran British improvisers such as Steve Beresford and Evan Parker with younger guests from abroad such as cellist Okkyung Lee makes it just as great a space for experimentation as ever.

Interviewee for this issue, John Russell, continues to make his Mopomoso nights a fine space for numerous combinations – a place to hear both established artists – Russell, Evan Parker, John Butcher, Phil Minton – and exciting new players such as multi-reedist Shabaka Hutchings. Russell’s link with film-maker Helen Petts, who uploads high-quality videos of most Mopomoso performances onto youtube (Petts’ channel can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/user/helentonic>), enables dissemination among aficionados who aren’t able to make it to London on a regular basis, as well – perhaps – as reaching a wider audience. What’s so exciting about this sort of development is that it at once serves a historical function – that of archiving musically important work which would otherwise be lost – and documents continuing development and activity, activity which doesn’t look like stopping anytime soon.

Given this, and given that the section in which I select highlights from the numerous jazz and improv videos available on youtube has now become a regular feature of the magazine, it’s hard not to escape the conclusion that the possibilities of internet video sites – and youtube in particular – really are a good thing, much as I hate to sound like a spokesman for big business and the shiny corporate face of new

technologies. I think the issue is one of working with the tools available – it's what free improvisation and jazz have always done; the only way to avoid continual slaps-in-the-face from those not impressed by the importance of such music is to get out there and make it known.

Take Philadelphia-based percussionist Toshi Makihara's 'Solo 365 Project' (<http://www.youtube.com/user/Solo365Project>), in which he records a 10-minute solo every day – usually with minimal instrumentation, maybe one element of his drum kit (often a snare) and a few sticks or brushes – and uploads it to the channel set up for the purpose. The object here is not produce 365 gleaming jewels, 365 bona-fide great works of art, but to showcase process, work and dedication, to enable viewers to truly participate in the process of making a music that engages with faculties both emotional and mental, on so many levels. Gimmicky as it might risk being, the fact unfortunately remains that it's this very gimmick that will probably attract most interest, and perhaps draw some converts out of those who were initially merely curious.

In any case, new converts or no new converts, it's a fascinating project and yet another example of the creative use of technology beyond arts council application write-ups for grand-sounding but ultimately hollow gallery projects, and beyond the flirtation with the easier elements of electronic music used to spice up otherwise utterly banal pop-jazz. When dealing with a music that demands utter engagement and which uniquely rewards it, it's important that such music doesn't become cloistered away into an irrelevance, even as it's important that it doesn't become tainted or watered-down. The latter point is not an assault on necessary pragmatism – where would this music be without ventures such as Incus records and the tireless man-hours put into tasks such as publicity, promotion, and the like? – nor is it an avocation of a po-faced hermiticism. The challenge is to balance real and active engagement with the modern world with a much-needed criticism of its more unsavoury aspects, to enhance and enrich the creative process and product in a mutual exchange of new ideas. As always, it's a struggle, but, as always, it's a worthwhile struggle.

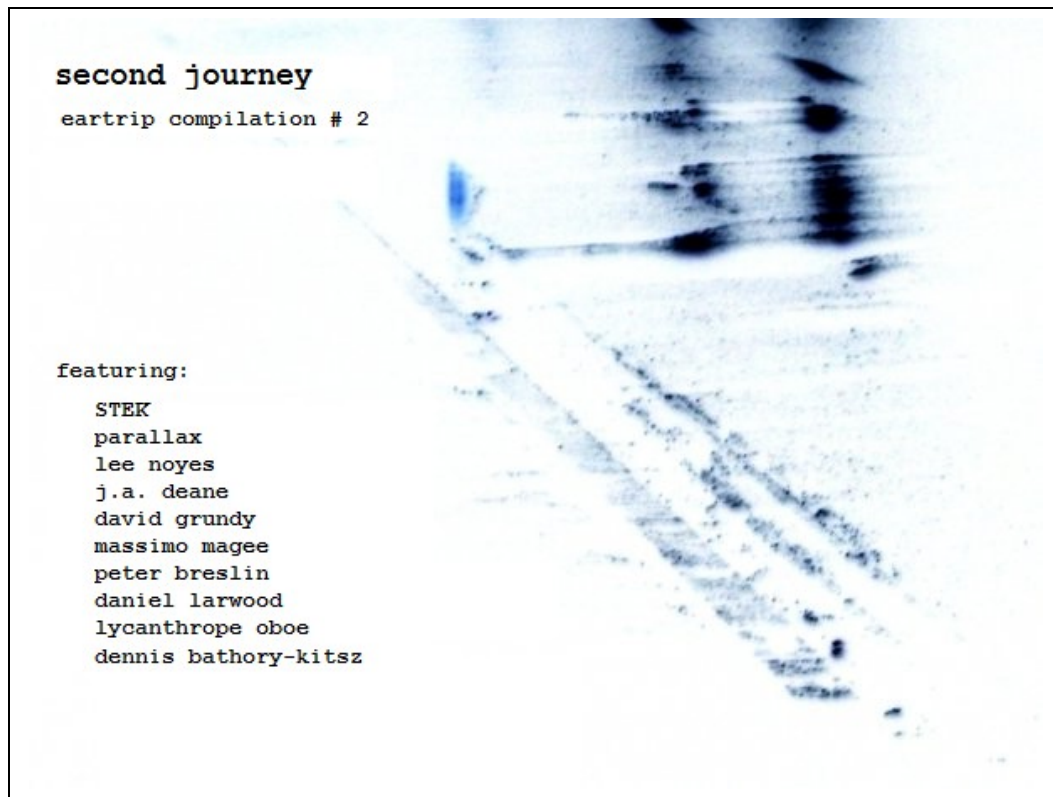
### **David Grundy**

The contact address is still [dmgrundy@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:dmgrundy@hotmail.co.uk). Get in touch with comments, positive or negative, offers to write for the magazine (yes, I'm still pleading for writers – tell your friends! have a go yourself!), and anything else you can think of. The address to send review copies to is:

17 Avenue Road  
Old Town  
Swindon  
Wiltshire  
SN1 4BZ  
(United Kingdom)

Alternatively, I'm happy to listen to digital versions, if you're worried about postage costs. I'm not so bothered about the format – the music is the important thing.

## SECOND JOURNEY: EARTRIP COMPILATION NUMBER TWO



The follow-up to last issue's compilation can be downloaded from the following sites:

- <http://sharebee.com/7f30dld0>
- <http://www.sendspace.com/file/mdij7j>
- <http://www.mediafire.com/download.php?zzyfoikqkk3>
- <http://www.archive.org/details/SecondJourneyEartripCompilation2>

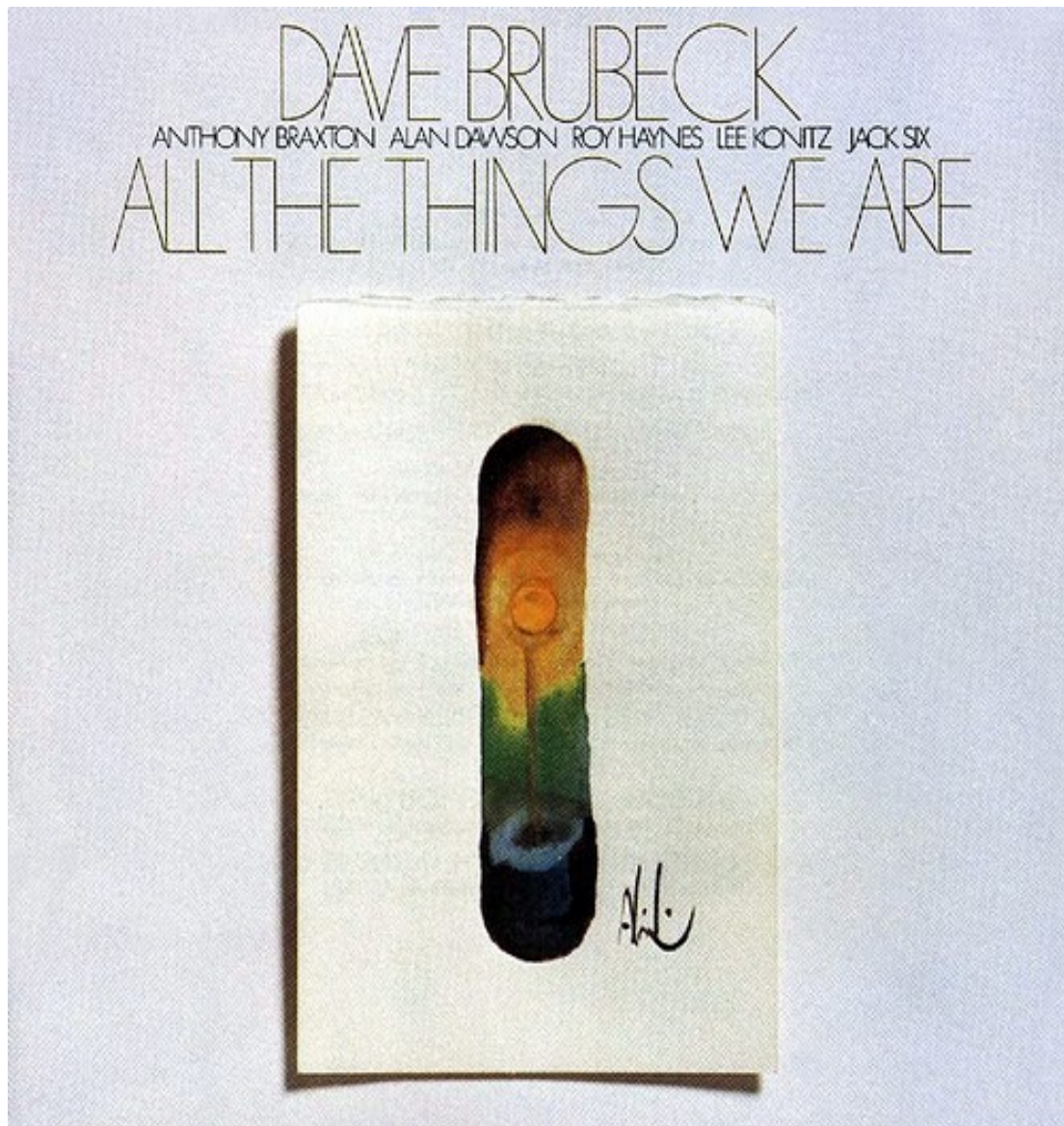
The tracklist is as follows:

- 1) David Grundy – Borne on the Fourth of July (excerpt) (10:00)
- 2) Massimo Magee – Nature Boy (12:48)
- 3) Peter Breslin/ J.A. Deane – Duo (10:09)
- 4) STEK – Chapter 1: Genesis (9:09)
- 5) Parallax – Untitled (10:42)
- 6) Lee Noyes/Dennis Bathory-Kitsz – Wooden Kind (9:29)
- 7) Lycanthrope Oboe – Wolf Shop (excerpt) (13:12)
- 8) Daniel Larwood – Ambient Improvisation (5:04)



# PAUL DESMOND (Part Two)

By Dr Martin Luther Blisset



## a discographical curiosity

Dave Brubeck: 'All The Things We Are'

Atlantic SD1684 (LP) also: Rhino 1684 (CD)

1. In Your Own Sweet Way (Brubeck) [7:39]
2. All The Things You Are (Jerome Kern / Oscar Hammerstein) [7:27]

Anthony Braxton (as) Dave Brubeck (p) Jack Six (b) Roy Haynes (d) Lee Konitz (as) on #2

1974 – October 3 C.I. Studios  
New York, NY (USA)

## **"All that is solid melts into air.."**

Paul Desmond (sopranino, alto & tenor saxophones, flute, bass flute, wooden flute, sopranino clarinet, whistle, bells, gongs, percussion), looked with one weary eye out over the city. The grey morning hordes bleary and dreary milled in the streets below like cockroaches between the tall office blocks and takeaway sandwich shops. All in grey, all in grey. Fog was slowly lifting from along the river, stone structures emerging from the milky air. Steam billowing somewhere, white on dirty white. All those people caught up in the grey rites of work. Joyless automatic bustle. White stone churches, pinkgrey marbled glass and steel towers. "All that is solid melts into air..." talking to himself again. Another night in another fleabag hotel in some depressed city, Europe, or the East Coast...

Cranking the window open and wedging it in place with his sopranino case, he put the Bb bamboo to his lips and blew. Closing his eyes he felt the reverberation, the waves of sound bouncing back from the slick glass surfaces, from the polished stone, from ancient unclean brickwork; a vibration low and raw, every atom of the air and stone and steel dancing, glowing in the golden light behind his eyes, the dark light behind the light. The walls of a hundred banks and insurance offices crumble, fast food chains and cruddy bistros shake and warp, plate glass buckles, twangs, shatters...FUCKING PURE MAYHEM.

Sound erasing text from newspaper/splintered city crest/dragon at the gates of Holborn/all municipal icons shattered/polystyrene bathos of dropped coffee carry-outs/abandoned cars crushed by falling bells...

"Honey, I'm home.."

## **mrs desmond serves the tea**

so i'm sitting in this living room sinking into the soft sofa. this place sure as hell is one million miles away from the life i'm living. why can't braxton play good stuff like old paul used to? we could be living it up a little.

the broad returns with a tray. she gives me the sweetest smile and the sun from the hallway catches her curl of blond hair and i swear for a moment there i get a lunge of some very pleasant feelings. "well" i figure to myself, she's not at all bad for an old dame. and besides i'm getting very little action these days what with the way lorretta's acting up lately and goddam braxton sprawled all over the joint all hours of the day and night."

anyways i'm sipping on this tea stuff, which [it has to be said] is pretty disgusting, so i ladel about a ton of sugar in and i'm trying to explain what i'm doing there, which isn't easy, being as how i don't actually have a clue what i am doing here.

"Excuse me mister Veinugum. I dont mean to be rude. But where did you say you knew my husband from? Are you a musician yourself, mister Veinugum?"

She falters, lowers his face and blushes.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be grilling you. I'm sorry. I'm being rude. It's just. I'm not really used to recieving visitors. Or at least, not alone. Usually Paul takes care of."

She breaks off again and looks awfully distressed. She looks around a dozen places in this little room, then sips her tea. Well it's good to see this god awful drink has some use.

"No really missis D." I start straight in with the missis D. I'm guessing it's a bit out of order with her, but it's not gonna get me thrown out. Jeez I'm gonna shake this bitch up. "No really missis D it's me should be apologising busting in here and all. It's just I've been hearing all these stories lately that are, frankly, disturbing. To say the least. You know me and Paul go back a long way and he's a nice guy. One of the few genuine nice guys on the scene. And I dont like it missis D. Is he in some kind of trouble?"

"I'm really sorry mister veinegem I should have recognised your name. It's just. He never mentioned you, I dont think. Or maybe I've just forgotten. There's been a lot to contend with lately." This broad's close to breaking point.

"Aw no, really. In a way, I'm from another time in Paul's life. Another place. I dont really fit into his current set up in anyway. But we were close. Not so long ago. He was also

really kind to me. Helped me out of a few jams. Cripes, he was like a father in a way." At this point I turn on the distressed routines and follow up with a nervous sip of tea, whilst I regain my composure. Strange thing is though - I am a bit distressed. Christ almighty. I never even met the guy. "Missis D I'm here to help in whatever way I can," I do my best very concerned look straight into her eyes. Dames are a synch. "Is it drugs?"

"Oh no. No."

She straightens out the front of her skirt with a few swift strokes of her palm. Sips her tea.

"A woman?"

"Oh no. Not exactly."

"I'm sorry to be pressing you missis D, but if Paul's in some kind of trouble, then I need to know what it is we're dealing with here."

Now I'm some cop out of a movie or something.

"It's music, mister vangreim. You should know, it's always music with Paul. Always has been."

There's a hint of rancour in her manner now. She gets up and puts cups and saucers ont the tray, cleans away in general. "I'm sorry mister vaneegrus, I'm being awfully rude. Would you like more tea, or perhaps," she flicks a glance at the clock on the shelf, " somenthing a little stronger?" She looks at the liquor cabinet. She licks her bottom lip, her tongue suddenly large and rude, out in the open. Did I just imagine this? Has this tea got some kinda halucinegic properties. The demure missis D returns and leave the room with her tray.

When she returns she's got the tray all full up with all the tea stuff again. Soon she's got the stuff served, I'm sipping my tea and she's doing the same. Leaving a red lipstick stain on the rim of her cup and smiling at me with those very red lips. I smile back and readjust my sitting position.

"Do you have a girl mister...Say, do you have a first name, only, being as how, well you know."

"Sure," I say, then - quick as a flash I say, "Richie." Fuck, what a sweet name.

"Richie," she says, like she's trying it on for size, which is what I'm doing too. "Do you have a girl Richie?"

"Yes missis D I have me a swell girl. I've been seeing her for some time. Yeah she's some girl I tell you. She gives me hell missis D. You know, nagging me all the time. Probably mostly for my own good. Like for instance, she keeps telling me, 'Rau Richie,' she says. 'Richie baby. She always calls me baby. Which is kind of annoying, but sweet too. If you know what I mean. 'Richie baby you should just unwind from time to time. You know, take some time out. Stop all the time tryna achieve, you know? Cool out' I say to her, 'Loretta you're crazy. I dont do anything much. I'm a bum baby.' But she wont listen." I shrug & sip my bourbon. Christ. What's going on here? Am I in therapy? Have I lost all memory? Is this the lunatic asylum?

"She sounds like a nice girl Richie. I think she must love you a lot."

"Uh yeah. Sure. Yes. I mean."

"I expect you're very fond of her Richie."

"Oh jeepers. Yes. Oh I am. I love her a lot. Once I get things settled, with my life and all, well I'm hoping we'll settle down and you know," I dont know where in christ's name all this mush is coming from, but I crack on, aware all the while, of this warm treacle sort of feeling spreading in my stomach. "And do you know, missis D?, then I think I probably will, slow down, cool it, like Lorretta says." I'm feeling myself warm up and slown down. I sip the tea and nibble at one of the biscuits I've somehow ended up cradling in my palm. "Well here's to life." I toast missis D, lifting the delicate little cup off its saucer.

What the fuck am I going on about? Missis D's looking quite put out, looking everywhere but at me. I also realise, there's tears in her eyes.

"Well hell missis D, that's enough about little ole me. I came here to see you and to see what I could do for Paul, and, for you. I really dont like to see what's going on with Paul, mister desmond, your husband and you missis D. Look, tell me to butt out and mind my own business if you like, but, well missis D, I wanna know what's going on here. And I just wanna how I can help. That's all."



## The Big Old House on Cape Cod

"What do you call that stuff?"

"Back home we called it Angel Hair. We'd have to go in there and pull it out, it would grow so thick it'd block up the stream, choke the fishes."

"I let 'em go y'know, my goldfish, so I could concentrate on the music, they wuz distractin me from my algebra studies.."

But Marilyn was getting tired: "Oh Anthony, why must you play such shit, why can't you do something that people can enjoy??"

Braxton shuffles his suede boots, scratches his head, and, whilst tapping out his pipe on a fencepost, mumbles in a ludicrously affected Oklahoma accent: "Lissen, Marilyn, most record labels, they won't let ya play tha real music. They want ya t' play pure ol' bull manure an' nothin' else. So i can't never git ahold of money an' all that stuff it'd take t' keep you an' me in a little ol' house an' home - I'd be a-lyin' to my own self if'n I said I didn't want no little house an' all... but I have this feelin' just gimme some time an' I can put the sounds together that's in mah head.. "

Marilyn had started piano lessons at seven at the Peabody Music School in Baltimore. She later studied piano and composition at the New England Conservatory in Boston but abandoned music for marriage and medical work in 1969. She returned to the music world six years later, moving to Cape Cod after a divorce and being introduced to the sound of John Coltrane. That summer Marilyn attended Karl Berger's Creative Music Studio. It was here that she first met, played for and with, and was eventually recruited by saxophonist/thinker Anthony Braxton to play in his quartet.

"I had been improvising since I was 14 basically because I was composing and I would improvise in order to get ideas," she says in a comfortable, unhurried voice. "It was really through listening to the music of John Coltrane that I got into improvisation. At the time I was living with someone on Cape Cod who had a wonderful contemporary jazz record collection, and I started listening to it, and that's when Braxton turned up. I would have to say it woke me up out of a musical stupor that I had been in ever since I had graduated from the Conservatory. Braxton had been listening to all kinds of music, Stockhausen, jazz, everything—since he was young," Crispell says. "Anthony's a real sweet guy, you know, a kind of puppy dog, but basically, I realise now, he's a nut."

The sun was setting, silvery and low over the sand dunes. They turned and headed back towards the old house, Braxton trailing slightly, keeping to the edge of the stream, sometimes tramping absently through stiff reeds and clumps of sea grass.

That evening they sat out on the porch listening to some tapes of rare Dylan stuff Anthony had brought in his duffelbag, the clanking guitar and whining harmonica drifting out over the salt marsh. Stubs of candles in jamjars flickered like fireflies ...

"Just what is it you want, Anthony? - I mean you follow me around like a puppy, but you won't say anything, except in that ridiculous bob dylan voice..."

## inside the mind of joe morello?

Frankly, Morello/Moreno's mind was a fucken mess...

Here he was in a grass skirt & tie-dyed shirt doing the friggin' hula while old Brubeck comps away at the electric organ & the punters shunt dimes into the slot machines. They bicker, knock back the drink, scratch their butts...

Christ that 32 bar chorus seemed to go on forever: He puts down the maraccas & swings the blue plasticated electric banjo into position

**TWANG...**

In a faux-hawaiian accent he begins to sing phonetically from the illegible beer-soaked song sheet:

"oh me daughter are sweet  
 she gimme 'nother call  
 living front down,  
 any however seahurt  
 me grandfather become rising  
 pretty hot happiness  
 please home, a-hula hula hula

she's handsome eyes spirits?  
 she loose since wild difficulty,  
 brother necessary school air  
 she dropped field tried  
 object wanted?  
 door girls worthy journey,  
 ba-doo ba-doo ba-dooba

ago more sit evening find  
 however stayed weird story  
 without threw tea  
 what top stories leaving  
 barely people end  
 passing object friends colour.."

...the banjo & organ trading a few bars of fours at the end. He notices Brubeck throws in a few quotes from 'Camptown Races' & the like... a smattering of disinterested applause & it's all over for the night.

"You know, Moreno, I think the folks like it" - Brubeck sweating and flushed with pleasure pours another scotch in the dressing room.

COMING NEXT: THE BRUBECK DUO WAIKIKI-HULA-CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

## **Pandora's Box**

Wednesday night and business had been bad. Roger Skerman shuffled the small mound of scraps of paper on his desk and began to think about closing up shop.

"Hmmm, maybe I'll reduce those Wordsworth Classics & put them outside with the yellowing westerns tomorrow... "

All through Clifton the bells were ringing & snow drifted gently through pink & green neon air. The girl with orange hair was still mooching around over at the poetry shelves, occasionally glancing up from beneath her fringe. A bit like Louise Brooks maybe. Was it the same girl who'd been in the front row the other night at the arthouse cinema?

## **Our Little Musical Family...**

'Rock-a-hula Christmas - huh one huh two..'

CHANK CHANK CHANK CHANK

The revolving stage brings Brubeck into view under the mirrorball. Sparkling light spills from his white white teeth, from his whiter than white tuxedo. Snowstorm of white hair and dandruff. Grass skirt parting to reveal knotted turkey-legs, the pale hairs on his bristling knees transformed into silver thread...Over on the banjo Moreno bites down hard on his denture, already consumed by sweats of mortification. The tourists and slotsters look up briefly, irritated by the intrusion.

'Thank you ladies and gentlemen it's so wonderful to be here sharing this special time of year with you all.' Brubeck mugs from the baby grand. This isn't half so bad as he'd feared. Okay, so a few compromises had to be made with the repertoire, like no jazz stuff forinstance, but hell, a guy can live with that. There's more to life than improvisation. He'd always thought the tricky time-stuff was the stong point anyway, and Moreno was working out well on the banjo, fitting in all the fiddly beats he used to play on the drums. Admittedly no one seemed to be listening, but these Vegas audiences were notoriously cool, and the money was strong enough.

'We'd like to continue on with a little ditty entitled Sleigh-Ride, arranged by my worthy constituent Mister Joe Morello - a-one-and-two-a-and-a-three-four-a-five-and...'

CHANK CHANKA-CA-CHANK

"Oh its-a lovely weather for a sleigh ride-uh together..."

Through gritted teeth Moreno spits out the words, blinded by the sweat pouring from beneath his rapidly slipping hairpiece. The humiliation! (worse than that time in his sister's room when mom got home early from the store...) Jesus, how did i get myself into this mess...

The glossy black carapace of his toupe floats adrift, plops like inky squid muck at his feet. "AND NOW WE ARE SO HAPPY LADIES-AN-GENNELMEN TO WELCOME BACK FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY TO OUR LITTLE MUSICAL FAMILY THE ONE-AN-ONLEEEEEE... THE WONDERFUL, MISTER PAUL DESMOND!!!"

Through kaleidoscopic lights & smoke effects, a banshee wail sears the air. A hunched figure in soiled loincloth and sharkstooth beads slouches from the wings. Moreno, aghast, loses the beat, staggers, slips on the sopping wig. Electric banjo emitting blue sparks. Brubeck dancing like a fried chicken, corpse-wax features illuminated by wild elecricity. The slot machines fall silent. Fat matrons slacken their girdles; emaciated trailer trashesses fling damp thongs, nylon panties, the occasional liberty-bodice, & a hail of room-keys at the slight & balding satyr who now occupies centre stage.

Caught up in a frenzy of feedback from the wet banjo and overheated wurlitzer, his ears addled by the wall of sound from the amplifiers & the saxophone's primal screams, Moreno begins to beat his fists on the piano lid, thrashing out an anarchic seven-twelve tattoo...

An orgy of violent noise ensues. The terrified but libidinally-charged crowd panic in the sheer force of volume. Bewildered finalists from the 'Miss Nude Amerikkka' contest on the second floor stagger blindly on stilettos through the throng ...

Backstage, Brubeck is less than happy: "Fuck it Morello, the plan was we all gather round the tree at the end & sing a few carols, remember."

.....  
joe morello had a dirty secret. one day when he was fourteen years old he'd snuck into his sister nancy's room & tried on some of her lacy aromatic underthings.

.....  
"what about the kid with the crutches, boss?"

"yeah, he's confirmed, and the agency managed to whip up a coupla wheelchair cases too, from the orphanage.."

"that's when i come out with the santy-claws gear & the bag a presents too, right?"

"you got it joe, then we all gather round the tree at the end, okay, ?"

## Paul Desmond Waits (part 2)

Paul desmond waits backstage. From the wings he watches the comedian is winding up the crowd. A big buildup, and Brubeck's on, with Morello on the banjo. For God's Sake!

Christmas song; hamming it up for the punters, the penny-shunters.

& What on earth has Brubeck done to his teeth? Heavens above, we were like THAT, me & Dave. I blame Morello. I only wish I'd never played them that godawful Take Five nonsense. Before that at least we were a jazz band.

All that pleading on the phone, & thru intermediaries & agents. PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE Paul, come back & do this one gig, Xmas Special, It'll be like the old times, the good times...YEAH...

"Take the ribbon from your hair, shake it loose and let it fall..."

Moreno gurns into the microphone. Voice like bad breath. Clank clank on the banjo. Wurlitzer WURLITZER!!!! like death parlor organ. Suddenly it's time, Brubaker's at the mic:

"...MISTER PAUL DESMOND!"

Cripes! Here goes then. Let's hope nobody's here from downbeat this time...

## "yeah cape cod, sure, all them years ago."

"yeah cape cod, sure, so many years ago." he stops his meandering memories and taps lightly on the the door. "seven years, since she's seen anyone. Anyone other than me. Christ." He steps in out of the vestibule.

"There's a man in your stairwell. Who is he?"

"How the fuck should i know? I think he's pretty much always there these days."

They walk the short cluttered shadowy distance of her entrance hall.

"Can't we make a call and get rid of him?"

"What's the point? Besides, i've grown dependant upon his presence to be honest. I dunno what i'd do if he wasn't there."

Entering the living room, he takes in the customary squalor, the reams of written manuscript paper over almost every surface, her piano, with just the middle two octaves free of paper, a thick book, covering the bass keys.

"We've had an offer of a gig."

"What's the fee?"

"A main course if we do one set, a sweet or starter if we do two."

"What's on the menu?"

"Pasta mostly. It's a venue above a pasta house."

"Sst."

"They want you back baby."

"yeah but i dont want them."

She sits at the piano stool. There's no other seating in the room, so he stands.

"How's the snow doing?"

"It's holding out pretty much. It's still fairly white and crisp. Even on the roads."

"Even the roads?"

"It just keeps falling. Pretty heavy too."

He glances at the heavy drapes in the window.

"It'd be good to perform the new songs, surely?"

"Fuck the new songs, they're not worth a piss."

"Christ," he thinks, "Bob Dylan never wrote about a real woman in his goddam life". He puts down the thick wad of manuscript papers he'd picked up from her desk. They settle back into the dust and mess like a child returning to the bedclothes after being woken by a parent in the middle of the night. "I still have the photographs. Maybe we should release them soon. He lodges on the edge of her desk. Bits of paper fall to the ground. She remains still at her stool, looking down at the floor, at nothing.

"No. There's no point."

"Come on, those photos are our no. 1 weapon. If all else has failed, these will not."

"We have nothing. It's too late now. We've missed our timing. Forget it. We're lost."

.....

Could this really be the same woman, who'd been so empassioned, who'd wanted him to achieve so much, when he was hiding out with his music and his chess and his Dylan albums? He crashes back from his Cape Cod memories as she hits one note on the keyboard, then dampens it with her left toe.

"Christ angel, it's not that bad. You just need to get out a little. Let's do the gig. Get some of the new songs out there. It'll give you perspective honey. You've been in this goddam hole too long."

"Perhaps you'd better go now huh?"

"Go?"

"Go. Leave. Just leave me a while, please."

He glances at the door and then back at her, but doesn't move.

"Leave me a little time to think it over, yeah?"

"Ok sure. How long?"

"How long?"

"Fer chrissakes. Come on."

"No. Tuesday."

"A whole fuckin week. No. Not this time."

"Tuesday. Two weeks. I don't wanna be sworn at next week."

"Fer fucksake. You can't just expect the whole world to keep waiting on you forever."

"No one's waiting."

He jumps to his feet, ready to leave the room or explode. She stays sitting.

"I'm not asking anyone to wait. There is nothing to wait for."

She looks up at the door as it slams shut. She reaches for her pen & fresh manuscript paper.

In the lobby he stands counting the white floor tiles. "Twenty six times thirty one equals eight hundred and six. He does the same for the black ones. He catches a glimpse of movement in the stairwell, reaches into his coat pocket and leans imperceptibly left, toward the stairs, ready to explode. Ready to betray her. Then he rights himself and heads for the lift. At the ground floor he pauses, thinking again of the man upstairs, tempted to approach him calmly and offer whatever they want to know; give her up.

Outside, the snow is thicker and whiter still. Nothing or no one moves on the streets. He thinks of his boots like those of the first man on the moon. "Should've sent a woman," he tells himself. "Should have sent a goddam toad."

## **WHEN HE DESCENDED FROM THE GODDAM MOUNTAIN TOP**

WHEN HE DESCENDED FROM THE MOUNTAIN TOP HE WAS CLUTHCHING HIS



ERECT MEMBER, SAYING UNTO THE MULTITUDES "GO FUCK LIKE CRAZY ALL THE TIME. LET'S FUCK. EVERYBODY LET'S FUCK. IF YOU CAN'T FIND A MEMBER USE A WOODEN PEG. LET'S FUCK."

oh christ. lemme out of here baby. you got any bourbon stashed under that grass skirt or are you just glad to see me?

"TAKE OFF WITH ME HONEYCHILD. THIS IS THE LUST TO END ALL LUSTS."

oh fuck.

"WE ARE THE FORGOTTEN SONS OF OUR FATHER'S SINS. WE LIVE INSIDE THE CHAMBERS OF OUR OWN HOLOCAUST. LUST WILL SET US FREE."

jesus fuckin christ you goddam lunkhead. listen. let's get this straight i could be anywhere i wanna be right now. you got that? any goddam where. get me some goddam bourbon. give me some goddam money. you got me stuck here in this goddam signal box. i'm not used to this kind of shit. what ever happened to the hotel suites? even the fucking motels were better than this peice sewerage pipe. i used to earn good money i tell you and it was not hard work, let me tell you that. but i gave it up to be with you honey. i thought you really were someone.

"LUST WILL TAKE US TO THE HEAVENLY CHAMBERS. WE WILL TEAR DOWN THE WALLS OF NON-LUST AND WILL SHALL RIP APART THE WORLD OF ALL ELSE AND OTHERS."

.....

"uh, honey cakes, what's all my awards doing out?"

i got em out. what d'you think? i put em up. sure yeah. why not. you used to be someone, pretty face. look at these. 'downbeat- musician of the year. metronome - reed player of the year. classical musician - composer of other musics.' these are something baby. you told me you had money too.

"uh honey cakes. what are these hung on exactly?"

nails

"nails honey cakes?"

nails and string. for crying out loud. this aint the point.

"where d'you get nails and string from darling angel?"

listen you fuckin faggot, i can get string. i can get nails. if i want em. why am i always itching these days. have you given me some kind of fuckin disease. i never got a single disease in my life.

"LUST WILL BRING DOWN THE BANKS, THE FREEWAYS, THE POVERTY OF THE THIRD WORLD, THE MOUNTAINS OF BABLON."

shut the fuck up. listen you fuckin moron. you been having a wail of a time down here where now i'm goddam itching. and where the fuck's this getting either of us? huh? ok, i phoned your goddam bank manager. 'hello, mister brinksmatt, yes mister brinksmatt, i'm so sorry to trouble you, i know you must be a busy man and all. it's missis desmond mr brinksmat and i know you shouldn't really do this for me, but you know paul's been away and i'm just so worried. anyway, what mr brinksmat tells me you shitcake, is there is no goddam money in your account anymore. so what's been going on? you promised me this whole signal box thing was just temporary. and now what? you tell me. what the fuck have you spent our money on?

"uh well, chimes, i guess, mostly, and this signal box of course."

you bought this fuckin thing you cretinous piece of poodle shit? you dont need to buy things like this. we can just live here, like we already are. who the hell's gonna know about it? "oh i couldn't do that. no. i traced the owners. the east coast railway line company. i bought it outright." he beamed with pride.

THIS USED TO BE SOME NICE PLACE TO BE BEFORE YOU CAME ALONG AND

SCREWED IT UP, IF YOU DONT MIND MY SAYING SO.

One hundred and twenty seven chimes hung in the windows of the signal box. But not one of the windows opened, so they rarely moved on a breeze.

He bought wind chimes whenever he saw them. Thrift stores were a good source. All kinds of shapes. Many of them fake oriental. Bamboos. Cheap metal, painted all kinds of colours. Sea shells. One had the letters O & M stuck to the handle. Tiny little shells, spelling out the word "om". Most clanked & clinked with little or no real chiming quality to them.

At night he'd stand at the open door and blow faint whiffs of sound from his tiniest bamboo flute. "Music to make the walls fall down," he whispered to himself. Then he'd come inside and set off the chimes, pressing his ear up close to the tinkling and clanking. Then he'd look out, pulling aside the curtain of chimes. But nothing would be changed. All the buildings and all the lights remained, undaunted by the butterfly tremors he'd sent forth at them. Car lights just like diamonds in the night. He could hear the boats in the harbour. "One day it's all come crashing down," he'd whispered as he drifted off to sleep in his duck down sleeping bag on the wooden floor. "Guess I'm gonna have to move into the heart of the city. Get a little room or something, right in the midst of the traders and money lenders."

At the end of his nightly flute & chime ritual he'd strip himself naked & then set off the monster chime, made of broken glass & thick long bamboo lengths, hanging in the middle of the room. Braxton had collected these bamboos from Cape Cod. Six foot lengths of the stuff strewn on the beach. Strong plastic rope fixing bright flags of nylon fabric at the tops.

"What are these things doing on the beach there anyway Braxie?"

"Shucks brother I dunno. Ah reckon they come from the lobster pots. Mebbe they be like, markers, for the lobster men yeah?"

"Shit Braxie what's with the accent? You been hanging out with Marilyn again?"

"Shucks Paulio, yeah, the sad eyed lady of the lowlands herself. When you gonna lay off blaming her for everything you dont like old pal?"

Later, over a game of chess, sitting at the tea chest Desmond had rigged over the handles of the point swithces, Braxie speaks low. A voice like candle light. "Joo ever check out Virginia Wolff man? Literary genius. Seriously off her rocker though. Drowned herself in a river. Stones in the old coat pockets. What larks!"

Later moving into check mate, he whispers again, "you know Paul, I dont think anyone's even begun to consider the full musical potential of bamboo."

For days afterward, Desmond would work on the lengths of bamboo Braxie had brought him. He'd cut them up with his junior hacksaw and build onto the monster chime, the aroma of his sweat mingling with the residual odour of Braxie's pipe smoke that clung seeping into the signal box like rain falling into a parched field.

MEANWHILE IN A WASHINGTON LOFT.....

he listens to the tape over and over. he know each grunt and sigh, each squelch and rustle of sheets on skin - all of it, by heart. it's as if these sounds were the notes to a familiar tune. but he is no closer to tracing you. his hunger is now beyond the proffessional. he burns with the insatiable need to find you."when i do find you, i'll fuckin anihalate you, you bitch" he hisses to himself as he listens again to the tape. but in reality he knows he's never gonna see you again. no one has seen you in seven years.

**(TO BE CONTINUED...)**

# SOME THOUGHTS ON ‘EXTREMITY’ IN FREE IMPROVISATION

By David Grundy

A couple of months ago I played a freely improvised gig at which our regular group was joined by a couple of guests. Three pieces were played: a duo set by our guests, a set by our group, and then a final, longer piece where everyone came together. It was that last piece which gave rise to the thoughts collected below.

I particularly enjoyed the way it differed from those that preceded it, the way the rustlings and loops and sparser textures which had been the domain of the duo became part of a denser texture, a more ‘orchestral’ approach. I don’t mean this in the sense of ‘playing together’ (tutti) or even in terms of loudness (though the volume does have a lot to do with this ‘orchestral’ perception, I expect), as much as I mean a thickness of group texture, an overall impact made of its constituent parts.

This is true of most improv – but it’s easier to pick up the interweaving of separate threads (even when complicated by the use of electronics and/or extended techniques which make the instruments less easily identifiable) in smaller groups or ‘minimally oriented’ larger groups. Here, by contrast, you could tell that there were several threads unravelling at once, generally going in the same general direction (it’s hard to play quiet breathy sounds, for example, when everyone else is blasting the place with clusters and shrieks and feedback), but it’s that general direction that’s important.

This isn’t so much like improvisations shaped by ‘conductions’ (where the conductor acts as a kind of instant composer, setting up different groupings and setting them off against each other, or with each other) but is a spontaneously-generated structure which makes its own logic as it develops, which has even less pre-thought than a ‘conduction’. A lot of this may be due to the fact that we had not rehearsed together before-hand (apart from a sporadic sound-check which can’t have lasted more than five minutes altogether). That said, the duo and the improvising group are in some sense ‘rehearsed’ groups, ongoing concerns in their separate manifestations; in other words, the performance brought together two groups of players with a history of playing together as separate groups, but not as one large ensemble. Of course, one might argue that every ‘rehearsal’ constitutes an actual performance, rather than a preparation for any grand gesture – it is all part of a continuum, or at least, an ongoing investigation, which may contradict its different manifestations on separate occasions – thus, the notion of a ‘group sound’ will be a complicated one.

In any case, this ‘un-rehearsed’ feel particularly struck me. For the aforementioned reasons, one could say that it was the ‘most improvisational’ of the three sets – bringing to mind Derek Bailey’s liking for unusual and unprepared collaborations (of course, the risk here is greater, but the rewards are perhaps greater too, the old platitude).

Anyway, I mentioned the ‘orchestral’ approach, and I think I’m just feeling out for words to classify the particular feeling and impact of that particular set, although, in the more loudly ‘intense’ performances I’ve been involved in – most recently, a recreation of Dante’s inferno – I’ve tended to get a similar ‘vibe’. Maybe ‘orchestral’ isn’t quite right, maybe I want to say ‘extreme’ – but then of course there are many different shades and manifestations of ‘extremity’ – and I fully realise that

often when I've remembered a performance as 'extreme', actually I've just selectively remembered the 'peaks', which may only have lasted for short periods, and somehow forgotten more than half of what actually happened.

Aside: That's why listening back to recordings has become so much a part of my playing – not as 'instruction' or just 'reference' but as a kind of genuine rediscovery of what happened, a reliving which I would characterise as 'improvisational listening' (isn't that what all listening always is, to some extent, even when you know a composed piece well, even if you're listening to the same recording for the twentieth time?). That's not to say that it doesn't trigger off memories of playing certain things (though sometimes there are things I hear on the recordings which I just do not remember happening, which I do not remember participating in). Hopefully it encourages newness; if I can hear myself repeating ideas in several recordings I'll try and actively seek out other approaches, ways of avoiding getting stuck in the groove of the endlessly-repeating universal long-playing record.

Returning to my main topic, if we call the 'impulse' I was discussing before 'extremity', could we also call it 'drama'? Should we be afraid of that? Of the performative? The development of such music as actually rising and falling to and from *emotional* peaks and extremes? I think Mr Bailey *would* be suspicious, certainly of the term 'drama', perhaps rightly so. And I do oppose the jazz (sometimes free jazz) saxophone player's creation of artificial 'excitement' over tired bop vehicles or such like, 'screams', high notes, fast playing as shorthand for 'extreme personal emotion'. This emotion is both that of the player, communicated through these sounds, and that which this communication is supposed to incite in the audience, make them shout 'wooooooooo' and clap and stamp their feet once the solo has 'excited' them out, all the better for them to return to their toe-tappin' swing-along to the return of the familiar 'head' – the contained explosion, anticipated, expected, even *demand*ed, and thus really illusory, a repeated false thrill. So the scream or high note or fast playing becomes a vocabulary you can 'lie' with, or convince yourself into believing that this vocabulary does *mean*, is *exactly equivalent to* 'emotional extremity', 'honesty', 'truth'.

I want to say that this is lying, and this is bullshit, but I'm aware of how close it approaches to what I was actually praising in a particular kind of 'intense', 'extreme' free improvisation. The 'true' and the 'genuine' that I can just 'feel' and know to be 'true' because of that. But Antonin Artaud's emphasis on 'vibrational' qualities to sound does chime with things free jazz musicians tend to say (think Albert Ayler's album title – 'Vibrations'): the snake moves to the snake-charmer's music not because of the mental images it produces, but because it can feel the vibrations through the ground, in its body.<sup>1</sup> Music as earthquake. As explosion. Artaud wants theatrical gesture to be *action*, not cipher or representation only, wants "a gesture in a painting or on a stage" to correspond with "a gesture made by lava in a volcanic eruption." Actors 'act' – they perform 'actions' – they do 'actions', don't just give the appearance of doing so. Is it perhaps possible to say that free improvisers too, *make something happen?* – that they make it really happen, don't just pretend to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> Antonin Artaud, 'Theatre and Cruelty', in 'The Theatre and Its Double'.

## Headphonica: Label Overview

By David Grundy



Opening the envelope: a black and white photograph of an apartment block, blurred shadow of a window-frame in the front, dominating the right-hand side of the shot; sharp perspectival swing to the tower (or the section of it that is visible) in the



centre, rimmed with a thin white outline tracing the edges of the building, half ghostly-aura, half child's add-on. Traces of white thumb-prints, white flecks, white edge of the card encroaching on the straightness of the photo's lined edges, pushing in from the left-hand side, as if the building might be pushed over by the weight of the dark grey sky – even as that sky remains depthless and flat, impenetrable or simply just empty, a blank screen reflecting back the nothing it faces.

In one sense the photo is so neat and formal – the tower-block's wide white windows so neatly arranged in their rows and columns – but there's something more here than the flatness of a mimetic formalism. The composition suggests at once randomness and exactness, at once the imperfect glimpse, the glance round the corner (as something terrible approaches) and the laborious product of hours setting up. This might be said to sum up Headphonica as well: a net-label, founded in late 2006, whose entire back-catalogue I was sent along with a helpful note on the back of the afore-mentioned photo-card. The music they put out mixes elements of lo-fi, underground aesthetics with sleek, shining surfaces as flat and inscrutable as the photograph's blank grey sky, the simple chord patterns and formulaic vocals of contemporary electro-pop with the noises and bleeps and metallic sonorities of the avant-garde, and even jazz, on acoustic instruments. With 67 studio and 10 live releases, their output is impressive in terms of sheer size. Yet however tempting, challenging, or appropriate it might have felt to listen to every release back-to-back, on a paranoid drink and drug-fuelled odyssey of music and darkness, I decided in the end that the Hunter S. Thompson or Lester Bangs approach was probably not best suited to either my current disposition or to writing that would make much sense of what I was confronted with. Thus, I went instead with the listen-carefully-to-selected-releases-and-make-detailed-notes-of-impressions-and-points-of-interest approach; so, while I wasn't able to make my way through all fifty hours, hopefully I've gone at least some way to uncovering some of the surprises and mysteries to be found in between the ears, on the headphonica trip.

### **Mr and Mrs Brian: *Richest in Cream* (Headphonica 007)**

Headphonica have released 8 albums, mostly EP-length, from 'Mr and Mrs Brian', about whom no little information is forthcoming, apart from the fact that their real names are Sven Hendrik Steffens and Lasse Kanit. Their output is pretty diverse, from the slowed-down vocals, bursts of noise, and touches of manic exploitation-soundtrack-fake-organ-jazz on 'the disgusting organic theme or the proliferation of incarnation', to the sludge-rock of 'Y/Shmart', but centres mainly around the 'impersonality' of beats and electronic sounds.

Headphonica 007, '*Richest in Cream*', is a series of warped sexual pop songs, traversing a number of styles as seems to be customary with this project, its soundscapes dominated most of all by deliberately artificial-sounding keyboards. Perhaps its finest moment is the second track, 'foyer d'amour', whose nicely-constructed, catchy musical structure bolsters up the deadpan spoken-word delivery, the sound of someone ushering a customer into a brothel. (Given that there's no one else in the 'space' for the man to be addressing, it would seem that the customer is the listener, searching for his cheap sonic thrills from his position of safety and power.) The voice continues, offering the customer limitless food, drink and sex; to get on in this world, "all that you need is your penis and cash." Such promises are delivered with the dry politeness of a butler or a porter, though touches of a sardonic sing-song humour show through the blandness, eventually exploding into the laughter of multiple voices

that plays out over the last third of the tune – simultaneously the delighted sound of the customer in his paid-for paradise and the brothel bosses counting their cash. It's a hollow and horrible hilarity, somewhat akin to the mocking despair ushered in by the laughter on Gorillaz' 'Feel Good, Inc.', and with none of the dreamy flights of fancy which that song offers as a contrast to the bleakness. The laughter ends, leaving one voice to fill out the final few seconds – a female one, the first time a woman is allowed a voice of her own, to be more than the object of shop-window talk ("we've got brown, blonde or foxy ladies – take two of them, lay in between, and cover them with your loving cream") a voice suggesting at once an orgasm and the sounds of tearful desperation, the briefest glimpse, beneath the 'groovy' exterior, of those who suffer – who always suffer – for the sake of the white, western man and his pursuit of endless pleasures.

The rhymes in 'foyer d'amour' are childish and scatological – "but listen there's one important order to you: no children, no pets, no wounds and no poo" – yet at the same time, they're an important part of the way the track's jokey mask shows through the real terrors underneath. As the "important order" indicates, the brothel is carefully regulated (though not, it would seem, to the benefit of those who provide its 'services'), as full of petty rules as any other institution – rules which offer comfort, which allow the customer to feel safe at the same time as 'letting go', pushing out imaginary limits and breaking the arid routines of normality while never straying off the demarcated path down which they're really being lead. William Blake would have it that "Brothels are built with bricks of religion"; in this case, the brothel seems more like some kind of adults-only holiday resort where flesh is brought and sold as any other commodity – a happy-clappy place where desires are manufactured, sold, and 'fulfilled'.

One might say that the impersonality on 'Richest in Cream' is that of human beings, blindly following their way through a world of pleasures which are ever-present (for a price), switching on the TV and watching blue movies, indulging in endless fantasies while masturbating on the hotel (or brothel) bed. Humans are reduced to their most basic levels, mechanically repeating actions which they pretend make them feel better but which only conceal an ever-widening void within and without, and which most often can only occur given the suffering, direct or indirect, of someone else.

### **Mr and Mrs Brian: *Oceanic Disco Bots '05* (Headphonica 008)**

The issue of impersonality is addressed even more explicitly on the next album in the Headphonica catalogue, 'Oceanic Disco Bots '05'. Here, the 'Brians' briefly allow but then deny even the nihilistic enjoyment to be found in the darker realms of modern beat-based dance music, and substitute for it a world of awful repetition, of endlessly-circling nightmare-loops, of inexorable and grinding two-minute Groundhog days. There's a narrative thread structuring things here (one could perhaps call this a 'concept album', though without the pompous grandiosity that implies): a cross between a cheesy sci-fi scenario to laugh at heartily through mouthfuls of crunching popcorn, and an actually and insidiously disturbing paranoid sense of a society infiltrated by technology on every level. It's the robots...the robots...they're here! They're at the door!

Each track is named after a different 'bot, or type of 'bot. There's the 'godBOT', who seems to be ordering everyone to have a good, mindless old time, jerking themselves to death in some spasmodic party (this disco is so big, it's

oceanic); then his spokesman, the ‘preacherBOT’ who whips everyone into a further frenzy, the “skin over metal” of the “disco-bot” given a sexual drive as the preacher shouts on and about the ‘programmable beats’ which are all that exists in this prison-disco (though everyone seems quite happy here, out of their mind in the annihilation zone, as they were even before the robots came).

‘timeBOT’: the aural equivalent of an epileptic seizure in a disco where the strobe-lights have sped up to double-speed and won’t turn off; ‘magmaBOT’, squelchy and reversed sounds like the asthmatic gasps of a monster struggling through the slime, minimal shrugs of low bass and the faint sounds of an oblivious drummer jamming in the other room.

‘partyBOT’: over driving drums and bass, the sound of a phone conversation – a friend urges the initially disbelieving Mr Brian to check the door, and receives the answer he’d suspected: “you won’t believe who’s at my door – it’s robots: an army of robots!” Electronically-altered voices buzz out their message over and over – “this is how we like to go” – the phone’s automated voice reads out an error message. The disco bots have turned dangerous....

‘deconstructionBOT’, metallic bangs and crashes, mixed in with loud disco beats and awkward sudden silences. This is music from the era of the scratched-CD, the possibility for endless looping, repetition beyond imagination, sound that can exist indefinitely on the terms set out at its birth, that just needs one finger to set it in motion and then carries on and on through its eternal limbo. Kettle drums, the sound of dozens of war-film soundtracks and war symphonies, find themselves in new, technologically-advanced territory in ‘warBOT’, together with crackle of radio voices. On ‘emergencyBOT’, beat-boxed voices take their turn – and it’s truly an emergency as humans too are transformed into repeating automatons (or were they simply that already, with only the illusion of freedom in their playground of pleasures, of endless ‘choice’?).

‘lostBOT’: an accordion and a voice, mixed-down and surrounded by more clunking beats, the sound of the deadened survivor singing the same lines over and over as he stares into his oblivion. With ‘skyBOT’ we’re into the world of some dodgy 80s TV-movie or computer game, all blaring keyboards and big beats. ‘babyBOT’ ensures things end on a sinister note, looped infant chimes and whispering voices the nearest thing to a lullaby present in this apocalyptic scenario. A click, the phone off the hook, the record stopped spinning: a minute of silence. Then, just when you were reaching for the off-button...one final burst; somewhere in the mix there might be the elements of a melody which sounds almost orchestral, but it’s near-completely drowned out by the beats and hisses and the insistent two-note motif that drifts through this mess, oblivious to its surroundings.

Is this an imagined future apocalypse, or this really now, the nightmare truth of a mechanised, technology-reliant society which has given up thinking for near-automated activity? Yes, the record’s paranoid and knows it; but maybe it believes what it presents as parody and joke, as two people messing around with beats.

### **Chocolabor: *Download for Airplanes* (Heaphonica 015)**

‘autopilot instructor’ seems to be building a relaxed ambient feel, but as the repetitions of the single melodic fragment which make up its entire five minutes increase in volume, the whispers and wheezes of a human voice, the whooshes and vague suggestions of beats, and, in particular, the gradually overpowering deep-bass

rumble, create something more ambiguous (though the piece ends before reaching the full noise-climax it promises).

‘fucktakeoff’, at twice the length, keeps its cards even closer to its chest – at first. A single, foghorn-like drone, accompanied by a barely-discernable vocal sample, is joined by hisses, steam-train clacks, and what sound like distant industrial drills, which almost completely overwhelm it around four minutes in, the stable element now being provided by some boxy drums featuring a particular prominent crash-cymbal. The rest of the track mixes these drums with further sounds of industrial movement and occasional washes of vaguely choral keyboards.

This all breaks off abruptly in the midst of another swell in volume; the following miniature, ‘no more delay’, at less than a minute long, is the most sonically sparse piece on the album, consisting of the pulsing of one harsh and buzzing drone. ‘funkverbindung 119’ immediately contradicts the title of its predecessor by prominently featuring a female voice heavily treated with delay, at first panicky, coughing and spluttering and crying, deployed in a sinister manner reminiscent of Aphex Twin’s ‘Selected Ambient Works’. Brief respite, of a kind, comes through what sounds like a flute played through a wah-wah pedal, and a drum and bass beat, but these turn out to be only intermittent elements of the texture, which is dominated by smeary, wailing keyboards.

‘Eurofight/ Kunstname XVI’ uses the same keyboard sounds at a slower pace, over another drone, with the flute again making an appearance; the whole thing suggests the desolate cries of circling sea birds as heard during a particularly nauseous spell on a particularly desolate beach. Finally, the only true moment of peace on the entire album, despite all the promises, is closer ‘The Commander Pipe’: simple sets of keyboard chords, played with a slightly heavy touch which suggests a church harmonium. In itself, it’s not very remarkable, but, in context, it does just fine.

## HEADPHONICA LIVE

**New Earth Objects: *Live @ Gruenowski* (Headphonica.hplive.001)**



New Earth Objects are Marian Reinig, Clemens Wegener, and Tommy Neuwirth (Wegener and Neuwirth are also involved in the running of the label). Of their releases, the first, 'Live at Gruenowski', is the more jazz-flavoured, though 'ambient, sample-based instrumental music' is the more accurate description. The first section, nearly forty minutes in length, begins with a vibraphone-like keyboard tentatively taking the 'lead', though various electronic elements are soon blurring distinctions between instruments, between actions happening 'now' and those looped from 'before', to create the impression of a gently-tinkling, slowed-down gamelan. Vocals haphazardly spray out words, maybe subliminal messages, maybe someone stuttering over the telling of their tale so much so that the message is lost. Another keyboard and a guitar assume greater prominence, heavily laden with phaser and delay effects. Twenty minutes in and a bass-line moves into the picture; finally, the brief simulacra of a jazz vibraphone solo, before things move into an electronic haze; a more pronounced beat, return of the gamelan feel. The meandering keyboards and tinkling loops continue into Part II, along with a vocal sample chopped up, reversed, replaced by another ("if I told him, would he like it, would he like it if I told him, now, not now, now..."). Part III ups the tempo a little; more samples, bursts of Spanish radio, things running out of steam: keyboard noodling with the sounds of background chat, clinking cutlery, laughter. In truth the focus was probably lost after the end of the first part: the impression from the last twenty minutes is that of clinging on to fill up space.

### **New Earth Objects: *Improvised Bedroom Stories* (Headphonica.hplive.002)**

'Improvised Bedroom Stories', at half the length, is a little more focused. Part 1, the louder of the disc's two slow, lazy jams, builds itself around a looped chord, a brief melody (played on what sounds a little like a marimba), and unremitting, un-deviating electronic beats (with occasional electronic manipulation of sounds – stutters, pops, radio whines). A few minutes in, a male voice, seeming to sing to itself more than to anyone else, drifts out in a high-pitched ethereal mumbling daze, the semi-audible lyrics not delivered *on top* of this texture so much as floating alongside. The piece builds volume towards the end, vaguely jazzy keyboard and guitar becoming slightly more active in their deployment of melodic material (one might even describe the keyboard as 'soloing', though the parameters which have been set dictate a more collective music, the dogged pursuit of limited motivic material over a long stage to introduce an unquiet, rock-flavoured trance).

I find this works best played several times over: on first listen, the trance doesn't quite set in, but, after a few goes (the whole thing only lasts 27 minutes in total), I find that the music's infiltrated and altered my mood-settings in a way that's quite disturbing. I say 'disturbing', but, on the surface of things, there's little evidence for this. Yet while the second track, in particular, has a very laid-back vibe, soft twanging guitar picking out unhurried lines over blissed-out bass-line, joined by a melodica warbling away as if from the soundtrack of some 'lyrical' road movie, things never feel entirely still, entirely quiet, even as they're only very gradually developmental: the comfortable ruminations of guitar, bass and melodica are made less comfortable by the introduction of electronic elements, twittering away louder and louder, from background to foreground, and by the late entrance of vocals, which initially sound like a zoned-out, less angsty Thom Yorke, and then pick up on a raga-like vibe to the music with some semi-Indian melismas.



So, while the album's described as 'meditative', it seems to be a meditation on nothing, travelling at a speed that's not overly slow but which seems unlikely to land us in any radically new territory any time soon: travelling with no particular purpose, to no particular destination, happy to simply wait for things to uncover themselves – or to remain hidden. Stories mumbled in the half-light, not-quite believed, not quite-disproved, there on the cusp, in the distance, half-seen in shadow.

**Een Pianist? : *Live at Heliogàbal [Barcelona], 26 sep 2007***  
(Headphonica.hplive. 004)



José Manuel Tabernero creates works which leave the impression of being moody and muted, though the timbres and volumes applied are often quite sharp (beeps, clicks, scratches, glitches, the vibrations of extremely low frequencies). The moniker chosen seems to arise from the fact that much of Tabernero's work involves the remixing and remaking (sampling, or otherwise manipulating) piano music – often, it would seem, that of Erik Satie.

Most often, the method is for a bell-like single chord or set of notes to repeat, at regular or irregular intervals, as part of a more fractured electronic texture. On 'Diferencial IV', the effect is something like that of a Morton Feldman piece, with the electronics providing an extra layer of activity at the same time as (deliberately) never seeming to go anywhere; by seeming to play against the static nature of the sample, they eventually reveal themselves to be underscoring it. I suppose the danger might be that they come to seem mere background, lulled into inoffensive reverie as the spice

in a dish whose flavours are otherwise inordinately similar; yet the quality and variety of sounds produced, for the most part, avoids this problem.

I say 'quality and variety', which is perhaps a cover for not really being much good at describing what precisely this means in terms of actual sound events. What's lacking here is my probably, in large part, my personal critical vocabulary, but there may be larger issues as well, the need for a widespread, comprehensive critical vocabulary to describe electronic sounds. Even years after the first experiments have solidified into elements of musical production and sound open to anyone (listeners and musicians alike), the way we talk about electronic music is still primarily in terms of acoustic instruments and of certain sounds which are expected from them.

Somehow it makes it easier to talk about work such as Taberno's when one can tell that the original source for the material came from someone playing a conventional instrument – a laptop, a machine, sure, but one neutralised into domestic familiarity. Traditional instruments can be viewed as simply tools to be used, to which the performer can maybe even have a physical relation of some sort (blowing on a flute, drawing the bow of a violin over (animal)gut-strings, hammering the keys of the piano). The non-human nature of the tool does not change our perception of the 'humanness' of the performer, or of the music. Electronics, though, associated with technology, the machine – through film and books and everything else – can't be thought of the same way – or we refuse to do so. Even as it has become easier to produce the semblance of playing an instrument more in line with the conventional sense of 'instrument playing' – the laptop, sleek and compact, as opposed to the studio clustered with reels of tape and switchboards and the like – the music actually produced can't quite be comprehended as emerging from recognisable human causation. In other words, one can't always tell whether this particular action produces this particular sound, can't be certain of an established relationship invoking comforting elements of control and certainty.

The weakness of the opening piece, a remix of one of Satie's most famous Gymnopodies, is precisely due to the fact that it makes its electronic nature more accessible, remains too close to strictures and rules of a sort which, while perhaps fine when considered on their own terms, are heading in a different direction than Taberno. It's too easy to hear the original sound source, and, once the basic melodic pattern has dragged itself out, one keeps thinking 'it's that famous Gymnopodie slowed down' – it seems too gimmicky, too obvious. Of course, slowing things down is in itself can be a successful artistic practice – think Douglas Gordon's '24 Hour Psycho', bringing out new terrors beyond the 90-minute pulp-schlock format in which Hitchcock jokingly indulged, tapping into infantile fear and desire and pushing the horror film's voyeuristic tendencies even further to the front than they are normally: blaring things out with a full orchestra rather than merely trumpeting them, in a manner at once more subtle than Hitchcock and more obvious, more over-stated, more crude. Or, in musical terms, Leif Inge's '9 Beet Stretch', a 24-hour version of Beethoven's ninth, the touchstone of the western classic repertoire turned into the grinding wash of super-slow ambience. A betrayal of the revolutionary ideals bursting out of the score; a commentary on the way that these ideals have become mere background noise, mere ambience, through the bleeding-chunks format in which most popular classical music is presented today; an examination of the material and materiality of sound, stripping ideology from sound in as direct and physical a way as possible. Perhaps '9 Beet Stretch' is all of these, perhaps none.

Taberno's piece, to my mind, has neither the conceptual nor the aesthetic logic or illogic of such a project – but that is by no means true of the rest of this

performance, which I found to be fascinating listening, tempering glitchiness and apparent randomness with elements of restriction and control, discrete use of samples with less easily-identifiable sounds, the quasi-ambient repetitiveness of the 'soundscape' with the fractured and occasionally noisy world of musical collage. Caught between worlds of fragmentation and cohesion, particles of sound spin out in loops and webs, dots and streams of data, visibly or invisibly connected, floating loose and free in the prison and prism of altering and unchanging perceptions. Beautifully contradictory yet single-minded, this is music of purpose and poise.

**Noel Taylor: *Foundry Solo Triptych* (Headphonica.hplive.007)**



The seven minutes of solo clarinet to be found on Noel Taylor's 'Foundry Solo Triptych' call to mind the 'Abime d'Oiseaux' from Messiaen's 'Quartet for the End of Time,' in the combinations of intense silences with long, held notes that crescendo into piercing heights and fly into bird-song trills only to sweep back down into melancholic reverberations. Apparently recorded in the converted basement of a pub while beer kegs were unloaded above ground, the acoustic allows notes to sing out beyond their natural resting-places, but it doesn't echo oppressively; and Taylor's hardly one to rely on natural atmospherics over musical effect, in any case.

**M. Del Zotto/ M. Spanghero: *Blind Statement* (Headphonica.hplive.008)**

More free improvisation comes along in the form of ‘Blind Statement’ by pianist Michele Del Zotto and bassist Michele Spanghero. “To improvise is like making a statement without knowing the matter of the speech but your mood; a blind statement that can be a strong assertion.” This, then, is music that’s not made from a position of certainty, authority, and pre-determined control, but that opens up pathways to realms not accessible except through a certain openness – though one that also entails a willingness also to be decisive, when the moment calls for it, to make the risky decision that turns the whole piece on its head, that determines new directions, new possibilities.

The disc opens with Spanghero sticking mainly to rhythms and repetitions while Del Zotto picks tentative, though firmly hammered melodic paths until he finds a repeating chordal figure which forms a new structural basis, building in intensity as he begins to pick out single notes in alternation with the chords which he and Spanghero clump out in unison. Still there – barely there – the rhythmic patterns accelerate, growingly increasingly frenetic as Del Zotto springs swelling and frequently dissonant variations on the initial figure. Notes spiral upwards, parody(?) of Lisztian Romantic-era piano excess, though Spanghero’s high register sawing suggests an altogether more strained and sincere state of mind, and Del Zotto’s flowing repeated melody with arco accompaniment keeps the moment suspended in the genuine.

Perhaps the only way to move on from that height is into a quieter, less cluttered and decisive texture; *almost* as if the players are retrospectively embarrassed at the heart-on-sleeve nature the previous piece took (not that this invalidates what was done, in any way). Bass harmonics, piano chords with the sustain pedal pressed firmly down, alternating with strums and plucks on the strings. Similar patterning to the first piece: a tendency towards the repetition of alternating ideas, the gradual pursuit and development of these in a way perhaps more indebted to the forms of classical music than to jazz’s linear successions of fresh ideas or to more helter-skelter styles of improvisation. The risk is of seeming too studied, too polite (or, indeed, of the opposite – of a kind of melodramatic excess), but Del Zotto keeps his melodies on edges – of dissonance, of over-floridity – while Spanghero seems more interested in the shades to be found in limited areas, small variations of pitch changing the colour spectrum behind Del Zotto’s dogged, almost motoric pursuit of melody. By the end of the track, things are once more loud and dramatic, though with a greater sense of galumphing urgency.

Back to inside-piano, scraping bass, metallic tinkle and tap and squeak; kept up for longer this time, though at the end we find once more a semi-parody of classical music, this time the sort of simple melody that one might find in a collection of piano music for children. To the final piece, and Spanghero’s still exploring those registers and elements of his instrument which move it away from its jazz associations, a growling, grinding sound sustained and perhaps even growing in harsh vehemence underneath the dogged Del Zotto, dogged as ever in following the places the melodies take him.

*All the music mentioned above can be downloaded for free (in MP3 format)  
from Headphonica’s website: [www.headphonica.net](http://www.headphonica.net)*



## An Interview with John Russell



**Interviewer – David Grundy**

*To start off with, maybe you could tell us how you became involved with free music. A lot of first-generation British free improvisers arrived from jazz; given that you came on the scene slightly later, was your route any different?*

I was brought up by my paternal grandparents in a very rural setting so when I went to the local grammar school I noticed that another kid in my class was playing guitar and hanging out with older kids. I badgered my grandparents to get me a guitar and a tutorial book and after a while set up a little group playing a kind of mix of pieces I'd written and blues/rock music. Not very good but it helped me try things out. I had a friend who bought records I'd heard of, in the days when you could go to the local record shop and order stuff, and checked out the early SME and Tony Oxley recordings. I left home to move to London when I was seventeen and played at the Little Theatre club, became a member of the original Musicians' Co-Op and started organising concerts.

*I wondered if you thought there was a great difference in approach between the music being made now and that being made in those earlier days, in terms of the performative aspects of the work and the variety of textures produced. Looking back at some of the discographies, I'm struck by the way in which Evan Parker would employ additional instruments other than tenor or soprano – in some cases he's credited on 'amplified auto-harp', for instance – and you also had Hugh Davies with his live electronics and invented instruments, and Jamie Muir with his garbage percussion. Whereas today when you and Evan play you stick to your instruments and play in a fairly matter of fact way— you just get on with it.*



In a way you're talking about the 'kind of noise it makes' and there seem to be a lot of people who are beginning to be captivated by that aspect of things and who also seem to have a different approach to the whole thing. I think for us earlier on, the search for new sounds was part of it, but the nub was to find material that could prove useful to improvising. If you like: to find an essence or core to a way of playing music. I did try various things with the electric guitar (preparations, feedback etc. and always trying to avoid the 'I've got a new device' mentality) but I quite consciously moved to the acoustic instrument to get closer to what being a guitarist meant. I'm still trying to do that. Incidentally I loved playing with Hugh Davies and still miss him. His understanding of the details and bigger musical picture was huge and he was very aware of the inherent properties of an instrument, i.e. not just its sonic possibilities but how to play it and hence make music.

*Focussing in a bit, I thought we could talk about your approach to the guitar. Given his importance in free guitar playing – and free music in general – was Derek Bailey a significant influence? And if so, how did you go about negotiating between that influence and your own personal style?*

Well, just before I moved to London I had weekly lessons from him for about a year. It was all about conventional playing and was very useful. In improvisation I'd been doing almost aleatoric things and using gestures a lot on the instrument, and I learnt how to map out the territory of what was being thrown up. I like very much the idea of 'the whole instrument' so I found his use of harmonics, ignoring or placing different emphases on the octave, the controlled ambiguity and particular colour of note clusters were all useful to me. Years later he used to come over to my place each week and I'd cook some food and we'd improvise duos. After that I thought I'd kind of drop out from his circle for a while as I wanted to work on my own. A few years after that I heard him playing some of my 'licks'. I'm not saying he was influenced by what I was doing, just that if you are in the same area and on the same instrument there is always going to be a parallel development. In other musics, most people can't tell the difference between Barney Kessell and Joe Pass, John Williams and Julian Bream or Ritchie Blackmore and Jimmy Page. I don't think Derek set out to 'redefine the instrument' he was just doing what we all do. Trying to find something to play.

*One thing which particularly strikes me about your playing is the use of repetition and riff-based material – not in quite the same way as the near-minimalism of Evan Parker's solo saxophone improvisations, nor in as obviously a referential manner as the wording of the question suggests, but marked nonetheless. Is this something that you're particularly conscious of?*

I'm quite aware of the use of repetition and of setting up fields of material within an improvisation. I also refer back to things that have happened before but this is all a consequence of following a musical imperative. Another point is that the instrument has very little sustain and the timbral range is also fairly limited so whereas someone on a different instrument might employ sustain and a shifting texture I have to work that much harder. The, if you like, 'melodic' or 'lead' part is in there, but I often disguise this by changing reference points, so it can seem like it's just a bunch of notes to some people.

*Maybe we could now talk about some specific recordings. Your second appearance on vinyl was a split-album with Richard Coldman, released on Incus Records in 1978. (John Russell - 'Home Cooking' / Richard Coldman - 'Guitar Solos' (Incus 31)). Perhaps you could tell us a bit about your own recordings from this release (which it appears were made in your bedroom, given the track titles), and also enlighten us a little on Richard Coldman, who seems to have kept a fairly low profile since.*

Well that was recorded when I think I was closest to what Derek was doing and had fairly recently switched to acoustic guitar. The engineer Bob Woolford went down to my grandmother's place in the sticks and he set up a Stellavox reel to reel machine, I sat in front of the microphone and he recorded it.

It was originally supposed to be a duo recording with Roger Smith but he said he didn't want to play with me any more and wanted to play with Steve Beresford. We all tried to get him to do a solo; hence the design with two independent sides. Incus (at the time Evan and Derek) said they wanted a guitar record, so they asked Richard who is now a film maker and living in Poland.



**The cover of 'Home Cooking': photograph by Steve Francis**

*At some point in the late 70s/early 80s, there seems to have been a little bit of a confluence between the work of the British free improvisers and players from the Japanese scene: I'm thinking of the album 'Aida's Call', featuring Derek Bailey with Kaoru Abe, Motoharu Yoshizawa, and trumpeter Toshinori Kondo, and the album 'Artless Sky', recorded in 1979 and featuring yourself and Roger Turner alongside Kondo, once more. Perhaps you could talk about the experience of playing with Kondo, and, in more general terms, about this British/Japanese exchange of ideas.*

Most of these players were on Company weeks; either playing or in the audience. Certainly that's how I met and ended up playing with them. I played with Akio Suzuki, Motoharu Yoshizawa and Kondo through that route and played with Takehisa Kosugi later when he came over to work with Merce Cunningham and David Tudor. Roger Turner and I had been playing together a lot and we thought to

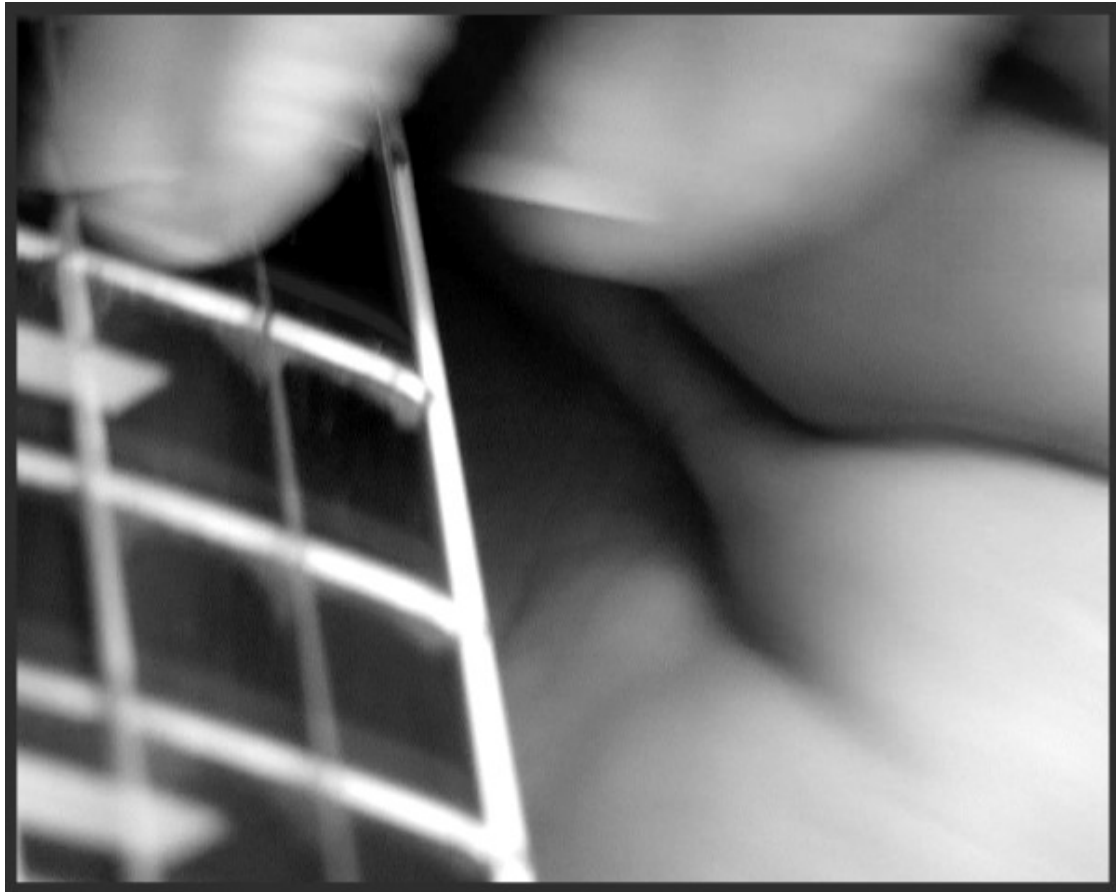
add Kondo, make the record and get some gigs. Kondo was also working with Eugene Chadbourne and I knew him through Eugene as well. I've been to Japan a few times thanks to Sabu Toyozumi who was in from the start and a great musician. He has introduced me to a lot of players not known outside Japan and I've found many points of contact with what I do and there is a genuine interest in playing music together. I am on one CD called 'Sangeraku' and have played with the group (including a dancer and calligrapher) a couple of times, which was a real pleasure. I'd love to play with them outside Japan and did try to get something in Canada but it fell through. Maybe if someone is reading this and wants to help me bring them over they could get in touch?

*The foundation of Quaqua in 1981 seems to have some parallels with what Derek Bailey was doing with Company. What was the impetus behind this – do you think it was similar to that which motivated Bailey?*

Derek told me he got the idea for Company from the way the musicians on 'Teatime' were working, in that we used to change the permutations each time. I've always done that as I think that there are at least four areas that influence how the music works. Playing solo, regular long term groups, groups that are together for a specific time for a particular project and one off meetings. In fact the first ever Company concert was Derek with Garry Todd and Steve Beresford and Dave Solomon and I joined them for the last set.

*In 1989 you appeared on the album 'News from the Shed' with John Butcher, Phil Durrant, Paul Lovens and Radu Malfatti, and, a couple of years before, you'd set up Acta Records with Butcher and Durrant. I wonder if you could talk about your relation to this quieter, more texturally-based improv, which seems to have marked out a new direction of some sort in comparison to what had gone before: coming less from free jazz and more from avant-garde classical, perhaps.*

By then I was playing acoustic guitar and with no amplification, as I hadn't found a way of satisfactorily amplifying the instrument, so it was naturally quiet. Phil Durrant and I had spent a couple of years playing each week with Mark Pickworth on saxophone (part of my philosophy of seeing what happens in a regular long term group) and when Mark left we asked John Butcher to join us. I'd been doing some things with Gunter Christmann's Vario groups and was very impressed (I still am!) with the way he directed things. For instance at the end of the concert he would ask the group to play four or five short pieces with no real development of the material and to try and make each piece contrasting. We later used this with Chris Burn's Ensemble. I'd also suggest things in terms of material. We then made 'Conceits' and set up Acta to release it. Anyway we thought we'd extend the personnel and I wanted Paul Lovens and to have a different colour a brass player so that was Radu. We made the record and did a short tour under the name 'Quaqua' rather than have yet another list of names and the album title 'News from the Shed' (which came from Lovens) became the group's name by default. There was never a conscious decision to take a different musical direction or start a school. It just came about from letting the music come first. I think that if people want to turn things into movements, directions etc. that comes later and is for them. I personally don't find that productive.



*I'd like to move on now to consider the role of 'form' and 'structure' in free improvisation. In a free improvising context, as you suggest in your article 'Somewhere there's Music', these develop spontaneously from the situation in which the improviser finds themselves (you use the term 'filters' rather than 'form' or 'structure').<sup>2</sup> I wondered what your thoughts on this improvisational process were; though, as you say, improvisation perhaps uniquely offers moments in which "the whole architecture crumbles, leaving nothing at all as a reference point", the rest of the time, something different might be going on. I'm not sure it's a question that's addressed that much, and it seems to me to have something to do with the way the brain organizes information and the way in which structures assert themselves – not rigidly, killing development or spontaneous growth – but organically and irresistibly. Has this been your experience in playing the music?*

Well, I guess, there's a number of things going on here. The nature of particular instruments, the immediate and broader cultural surroundings and the musicians themselves, all have a bearing on what happens to form and structure. There has been some research using MRI scans to suggest that some areas of the brain switch off and others, that deal with strategy, turn on and are more developed in improvisers. I think perception shapes concepts and in turn our concepts shape our perceptions, so for me the important thing is to try to 'open up' to what is going on. An athlete might call this 'getting in the zone'. I do have moments of abstract thought away from the instrument and the general day to day mundanities, that I believe are a necessary part of being a musician. This might sound a little strange but I'm sure daydreaming is good for you

<sup>2</sup> John Russell, 'Somewhere there's Music', in Rubberneck magazine, 1993 – available online at <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~rneckmag/russell.html>

(Ha Ha) have a look at GK Chesterton's essay on idleness which I remember as being quite fun.

*Returning to the question of lineage, there would appear to be quite a difference between guitarists coming to this music from experimental rock – let's say, Henry Kaiser or Thurston Moors – and those who had concentrated on free playing from earlier on. I wondered about your own encounters with such players, what particular approaches you think they bring that might differ from your own, what particular tensions might be created by this, and also what sort of common ground you've found.*

The guitar is a great instrument and one of the things that makes it a great instrument is it's mongrel ancestry. It has travelled all over the world and is employed in so many musical styles that to definitively take an overview on how the guitar is played is practically impossible. I can only talk about my own approach and I would say that I've looked at it from Nick Lucas through Eddie Lang up to the present day and, although there are far more resources available to the student, many of them aren't comprehensive enough, preferring to concentrate on specific areas at the expense of others. It's again an, 'I like that sound. How do I play it?' kind of thing, and while not un-useful, as an improviser I feel one needs to find a bigger view than that. For instance George van Eps book on guitar harmony works on all the possible sets of string combinations and although it deals with diatonic harmony can be adapted for any other system of tonal organisation. I don't know Thurston's music which is a sad gap in my knowledge but I do know Henry and in fact I'm hoping to have a duo recording I did with him released, on a compilation of me playing in duos with other string players, later this year. Doing it was great fun, Henry is a real guitar enthusiast and a fine player. It was the first time we had played together in about thirty years!

*One of your principal areas of activity since the early 1990s has been Mopomoso, the live concert series you founded with Chris Burn. Perhaps you could talk about the importance of this for you.*

Since about 1973, when I started organising concerts, it has always been an important part of my musical life. There have been times when there were very few opportunities to play and the only way possible to perform was to put something together yourself. When I started Mopomoso it was not such a good time so I approached Chris and asked him if he'd like to help. Since then there have been an unbroken chain of monthly concerts plus a number of special events and workshops. Thanks to Tim Fletcher we have an audio archive going back at least ten years and with Helen Petts, a video collection going back over a year.

Other people like Chris Cooper, Martin Davidson and Paul Martin have also recorded concerts for us and I hope one day we can make this available. It is a big job. Of these records there are about 11 CDs released that were all or part recorded live at Mopomoso concerts & Helen Petts has uploaded a whole heap of films onto Youtube.

In terms of programming I try to use a broad brush and not be stylistic, with the only stipulation being that the music is, or has a bearing on, free improvisation. I also try to take into consideration what is happening locally, regionally, nationally and internationally, and also to give lesser established musicians a spot alongside the established players. I get a lot of help for this and apart from the above George Coote

who runs the box office, and Will Connors who does the sound, deserve honourable mentions.

Oh...And I get to play once a month!

*You perform in a number of regular improvising groupings, such as your duo with Henry Lowther, and your trio with Evan Parker and John Edwards. By contrast, Mopomoso pits you in with lots of new combinations and ad-hoc groupings, it seems; perhaps you could talk a bit about the advantages and disadvantages of playing in a regular group, and in first-time encounters.*

I said earlier that I find both things valuable as they present different challenges. It is interesting to see how a particular group's language develops and to take part in that and, playing in new permutations, means that you have no preconceptions. To some extent it is really the same thing though. I'm just trying to find something to play that is appropriate and I try to bring my complete abilities with me and keep an open mind.

*And, similarly, what do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of playing solo, as opposed to in a group?*

Every musician plays solo but not all of them do it in public. I feel it is an important thing to do not least because of the nakedness of the experience and the directness with an audience. It also allows me to approach the material differently in that if something takes my fancy I can work with that without having to worry about the music going in another direction. In answer to this and the previous question I don't find any disadvantages really. I love improvising in all the different possibilities. It is what it is and I haven't found a better way to get close to music and playing the guitar.

*Elsewhere, you've mentioned your interest in cross-disciplinary work: collaborations with poets, theatre and performance art. Sometimes it seems to me that this side of things gets rather neglected. Why do you think this might be, and what do you find particular exciting about this sort of work?*

I think other disciplines have other priorities. I was doing a guitar concerto for the Dutch composer Gilius van Bergeijk and he told me of an actor who said he really liked the way Gilius brushed some sweat off his forehead while playing the piano. For him it was something that arose from playing but the actor saw it as a theatrical gesture! Working with words is interesting because it's another part of the brain and the counterpoint with music can create a different stimulus. Some areas of Performance art emphasise the physical, behavioural and visceral and in the visual arts a whole new juxtaposition arises. It's about how we are in the world and where the boundaries are with music. I feel it's good to look at and experience these things but it is always important to understand the differences between disciplines.

*Finally, what are some of your current/future plans?*

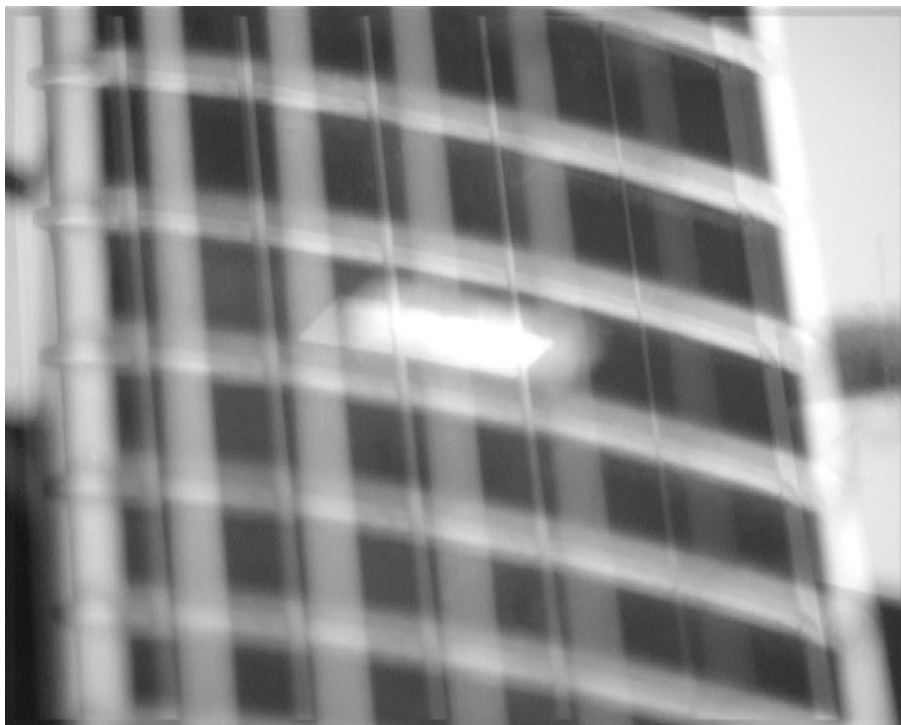
Well...I've got the Mopomoso going on each month. In August (16/17/18) there is Fete Quaqua which I am really looking forward to. (Here's the line up)

- Satoko Fukuda (UK) – violin
- Pat Thomas (UK) – keyboards
- John Butcher (UK) – saxophones
- Sabu Toyozumi (Japan) – percussion
- Jean Bordé (France) – bass
- Lui Chao yun (Taiwan) – pipa
- Ute Voelker (Germany) – accordion
- Angelika Sheridan (Germany) – flutes
- Lol Coxhill (UK) – saxophone
- John Russell (UK) – guitar
- Shabaka Hutchings (UK) – reeds
- Henry Lowther (UK) – trumpet
- Hannah Marshall (UK) – cello

A couple of concerts in France and a solo in Austria (Ulrichsberg) in December at a festival to mark Paul Loven's sixtieth. I'm also going to Japan. On the recording front we are working on mastering a CD for the trio with Michel Doneda and Roger Turner. I have just completed recording a solo CD for Psi, and a recording with Evan and John for John Zorn's label. There's a duo CD with cellist Martine Altenberger, which was recorded from a live concert in France last year, and is coming out in the Autumn for Another Timbre; the duos CD with various string players for Emanem and a Winter release on Amirani of a quintet, title undecided, for Gianni Mimmo. Oh...And I'm trying to move house!

***Information about Mopomoso is at <http://www.mopomoso.com>.***

***A short film by Helen Petts called 'Guitarist: John Russell' can be seen at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xByBLJ4IZd8>. Photographs (see also magazine cover photo): John Russell live at the Festival R. De Choc, Paris, and stills from the film 'Guitarist'. © Helen Petts. [helenpetts@clara.co.uk](mailto:helenpetts@clara.co.uk)***





## YOUTUBE WATCH

Duke Ellington (feat. Harry Carney) – ‘Sophisticated Lady’

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkTEfrmqxws>



A short clip of the Ellington orchestra live in Copenhagen, this is a solo showcase for baritone saxophonist Harry Carney; after a spirited introduction from Ellington, Carney takes the melody and a solo (which is mostly based around the melodic pattern), his forceful playing pushing past Gerry Mulligan smoothness with some real bite – I think I even a Brotzmannesque quality a couple of times, although, for contrast, listen as he suddenly drops back for some higher-register flutters around two minutes in. And then he holds a single note for a full minute, nearly a third of the clip’s running time.

At first this might seem like a gimmick, but it’s actually also Ellington and Carney playing with form, stretching out the ‘jazz’ ending, the held note, and running with it. Carney’s note functions as a drone, over which Ellington and the unseen bassist trade a skittish melodic shape, but, in large part due to its volume, it refuses to be merely background, and there’s thus a sense of ‘how much longer can it go on for?’: an extended tension, the anticipation of an ending which is actually in progress, but which has been stretched out far beyond the expected length (in fact, it’s something of a false ending, as Ellington swoops down the keyboard and brings in the band for an emphatically final ‘real ending’). This is not so much a musical joke as a brief experiment, then, and it’s a surprisingly effecting one.

And there’s something about watching it on film too: the expression on Carney’s face as he circular breathes to maintain the note, the sense of effort this imparts to a ‘sophisticated’ ballad. Also worth noting is the bored expression on Johnny Hodges’ face as he sits next to Carney during that final note, suddenly picking up his sax and blowing as he realizes he has to come in for the final band crescendo: moments such as these didn’t have quite the same appeal to everyone, even members of the band.

### Dunois Jazz Channel

<http://www.youtube.com/user/dunoisjazz>



I'm putting this one down as the whole channel, rather than selecting any individual videos, as the channel consists of short (1-2 minute) videos featuring many great jazz and improv performers during the 1980s, recorded at a jazz club in Paris. Given that they remain clips only, rather than complete performances, it seems to make more sense to place them side by side. Looks like the club where they were filmed was an exciting and diverse place: featured are American jazzers like Sonny Sharrock, who kicks out the jams in typically mind-boggling fashion and breaks a guitar string in the process, without missing a beat – (w)rapt as he is in total, joyous concentration – and then spinning out some surprisingly gentle jazz balladry, a side of him not much heard. Mal Waldron also makes an appearance, with some great, hard blowing from saxophonist Richard Raux in a hard-bop context somewhat similar to Waldron's work with Archie Shepp, but perhaps a little freer.

British free improvisers can also be seen doing their thing: Steve Beresford, John Stevens, and Lol Coxhill performing one of his wonderful spoken word pieces with the Recedents (from the extract, it sounds like a surreal one-man conversation, mixed in with the sudden intrusions of a popular song – at once funny and a little disturbing (particularly given Coxhill's clean-pated resemblance to Donald Pleasance's character in Polanski's 'Cul-de'Sac'). Coxhill also turns up alongside French maverick Jac Berrocal, this time playing the straight man as Berrocal swings bells and cymbals around while dressed in leather trousers and jacket.

Of particular interest for me are the two videos of a Ted Milton's British No-Wave-style band Blurt. Milton was a poet and puppeteer as well as a singer and sax player, and it's a great chance to see his performative antics, laid out over the aggressive mechanical chug of the other band members.

Another highlight, in a completely different vein, is the extremely powerful vocal style of Basque singer Benat Achiary, in duet with soprano saxophonist Michel Doneda: a blend of raw folk tradition with the unpredictability of improv that reminds me a little of the work of Ghedalia Tazartes. Though he's made recordings of traditional folk music and in improv contexts (and some where the two cross over), Achiary is too little known, but he's clearly a passionate and skilled musician.

Of course, it would be nicer if all these clips were longer, but, as it is, it's a great cross-section of things – give yourself half an hour, pop all the videos into a youtube playlist, and watch multiple delights unfold.

**‘The Universal Mind of Bill Evans’**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jm6V7bWnVpw>



An unusually thoughtful jazz documentary, this is a particularly welcome find, this. Too often even quite promising modern jazz docs are overly scattershot in their approach: for example, you arguably learn more about Sun Ra from the fiction film 'Space is the Place' than the more recent 'Brother from Another Planet' (which draws on 'SITP' as well as the 1980s documentary 'A Joyful Noise' - 'AJN' does the right thing in letting Ra and members of the Arkestra speak their mind without 'amplification' or 'enhancement' from obtrusive journos or critics). 'Talking heads' (whether these be critics or musicians) tend to be used merely to deliver fairly obvious factual snippets or unsubstantiated opinions, with short bits of music that aren't given time to breathe amongst the commentary. A good example might be the film about 'New Thing' jazz released on DVD by ESP Disk, 'Inside Out in the Open', which is admittedly hampered by its length - it feels like it's trying to cram a whole TV series' worth into a mere hour.

But even those programmes which have the luxury of giving more time to their subjects, such as Ken Burns' 'Jazz', fall into the same trip – most infamously when Cecil Taylor could be dismissed by a wilfully ignorant Marsalis comment and an extremely brief snippet of a piano solo whose overall feel is actually very different to the chosen excerpt. (The performance comes from Ron Mann's 1981 film 'Imagine the Sound', which gives interview and music space to Archie Shepp (who'd by then moved out of the free jazz stage of his career), Bill Dixon (in a trio setting), Paul Bley, and Taylor. Portions of the Shepp, Dixon and Taylor bits of the film are, as you might expect, scattered around youtube: the Taylor clip in question can be found at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=cP5L8tjnB6w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cP5L8tjnB6w).) Some might argue that, as with television news, an agenda is being pushed - the impression of 'neutrality', of hearing several sides of the issue, is foisted upon us by the wide variety of talking heads, even as they merge into one voice, crowing the party line. This might not even be their fault - but selective editing can make it so. And, importantly, it might not even be the fault of the film-makers (debate Mr Burns' motivation in the aforementioned Cecil Taylor example as you will), as much as a result of the constraints they have to work under - most obviously, with regards to length, and to the sheer scope of material they have to address within such limiting confines.

Which is why I think the 'small is beautiful' approach is probably where the best jazz docs come from. There are no such compromises, no glaring omissions and skewed/chopped viewpoints in the Bill Evans documentary. By limiting things down

to three people - Steve Allen, for the introduction; Bill Evans, as the documentary subject; and his brother Harry, as interviewer - it allows their thoughts to emerge at greater length, and with greater clarity; allows us access to the creative process of an artist without the talking-heads' schizophrenic data-barrage of dates, anecdotes, narratives. It's willing to be slow and to give time for actual thought about jazz as a serious artform.

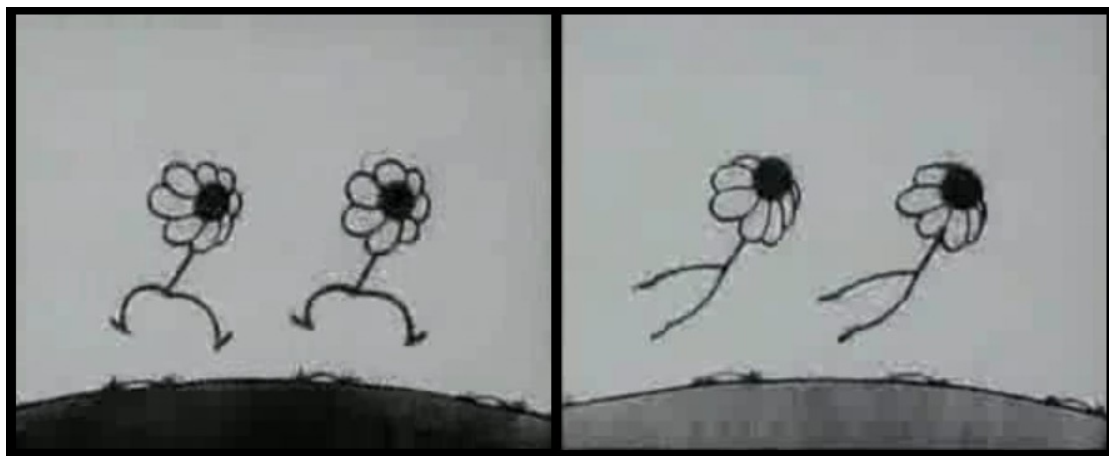
As for the actual content of the prog, there are some interesting ideas, though I'm not sure I agree with all of them. The intro from Steve Allen is surprisingly shtick-free (apart from the rather forced gag where he pretends to forget his name), and his point about technique becoming so ingrained that the spontaneous aspects of improvisation can flow naturally, without forced or pre-planned conscious thought - that the artist can think with/through technique - actually parallel some of the comments Evan Parker makes in David Borgo's book on improvisation 'Sync or Swarm': Parker backing up his ideas with scientific reference to the left and right hemispheres of the brain, or to psi phenomena.

The statement by Evans which opens the doc is particularly controversial: the notion of a "universal musical mind" somewhat similar to Chomsky's 'universal grammar', or even to Hegel's 'Absolute Spirit', relies on non-interrogated notions of the 'real', the 'true', the 'good'. (Though admittedly, later on, Evans demonstrates (by some variations on the tune 'How About You'), how playing 'simply' can be more 'real' than approximating a more complex approach for which you do not have the technical skill). I'm also intrigued by the way in which he thinks a 'sensitive layman' may have more insight than a hardened professional, unconcerned as they are with the technical niceties of performance, more able to appreciate the spontaneous joys of creation. I'd only go along with that so far, though I think it's a valuable corrective to the 'high priesthood' of critics telling us what to think, whose opinions may be no more valuable than those they 'teach'.

But let's not get into that whole 'role of the critic' debate. There's much to digest on this documentary, the whole of which can be found in 10-minute segments, linked from the original video.

### **Terror Threat ('Re-Sonorisation n.1')**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MO\\_R\\_U59tIw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MO_R_U59tIw)



I guess this is more in the line of the novelty videos which seem to be youtube's stock-in-trade – if you follow the mainstream paper and digital media sources, that is. But, while it may not be a valuable historical record or a serious

documentation of the process of music-making, I don't think it's to be sniffed at. The rather alarmist-sounding title 'Terror Threat' might, I suppose, hint at the nightmare nature that you always find in the surreal dream-world of cartoons, the permitted world of anxieties, a psychoanalytic playground I'm sure. What we actually have, though, is a vintage Felix the Cat short from 1930 entitled 'April Maze', a spring fantasy filled with dancing flowers (see picture), sinister thunderstorms, bursts of sunlight, and odd interactions between cartoon animals which, given the lack of dialogue or of sound effects, take on almost ritualistic nature – a kind of symbolism without symbolizing, perhaps, the appearance of standing in for something else (or maybe just existing in its own world without the need for that sort of justification). Sound has been provided by syncing up Eric Dolphy's 'Hat and Beard', from 'Out to Lunch', which fits remarkably well with what we see on screen.

As Scott Bradley realized when scoring countless 'Tom and Jerry' shorts, the sort of sounds generally associated with 'avant-garde' music bring with them an irresistible pull to laughter, when deployed in the right context and with the right comic timing. Drunken, mock-sinister 12-tone marches were thus an integral part of the ever-changing audio landscape which Bradley provided, and which doubtless influenced the methodology and outlook of John Zorn's frantic pace changes in *Naked City*. Humour, too, is a part of Dolphy's approach, those exhilarating switches of register and yowling smears and squawks hinting at the same anarchic impulse that lies behind the classic MGM cartoons; that's not to downplay Dolphy's discipline and dedication to his craft, but I don't think humour has to be immediately frowned on. In fact, separating the 'avant-garde' off as purely 'serious music' does a disservice to a music with the emotional variety and frequent joie-de-vivre of Dolphy, and this 're-sonorization' brings that out beautifully. To take just one example, a beaming sun comes out as Dolphy's solo comes to an end, a bird landing on a telephone wire perfectly syncing with the brief flutter from Bobby Hutcherson's vibes which introduces Freddie Hubbard's solo. I'm not sure whether this is so much a re-imagining of Dolphy's piece or a re-imagining of the cartoon; rather, it's a neat match-up which manages not to do a disservice to 'Out to Lunch'.

### **Sun Ra Arkestra – 'Shadow World'**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtHmqbnuZQs>



This one finds Sun Ra live in West Berlin in the 70s. The sound quality is a little muddy, and the picture quality is fuzzy – this has clearly been ripped off a VHS tape – but it's a great example of the Arkestra's sense of theatre as they launch into a particularly liberated workout, albeit one set up by the relentless rhythmic riff which Ra plays on piano. The guitarist in particular gets the spirit/ gets into the spirit, with some chair and cymbal throwing sparking the emergence of several players from the Arkestra's ranks for a bizarre trance-dance up the front of the stage, the baritone player doing a full 360-degree rotation on his back, while still playing, bass clarinet



thrown up and down in the air in ecstasy. But this isn't just a visual aspect – it's a complete performance, mythic archetypes of sound and image, or, more prosaically, a re-figuring of acoustic space which one might compare to Sonny Rollins' ambulatory performance style, writ large.





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*“Criticism is always the easiest art.”*

- Cornelius Cardew

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**Reviewers:** Nick Dart, David Grundy, Sandy Kindness, Oscar Lomas

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### **FABRIZIO BOSSO/ ANTONELLO SALIS – *STUNT***



**Label:** Parco Della Musica

**Release Date:** 2008

**Tracklist:** Caduta Libera; Body and Soul; Moschito's Chase; Roma Non Fa La Stupida Stasera; Tibet; Caravan; Stregati; Georgia On My Mind; Solo un Incubo; Mack the Knife; Before Sunday; Domenica e Sempre Domenica; Burst Blues; Bésame Mucho

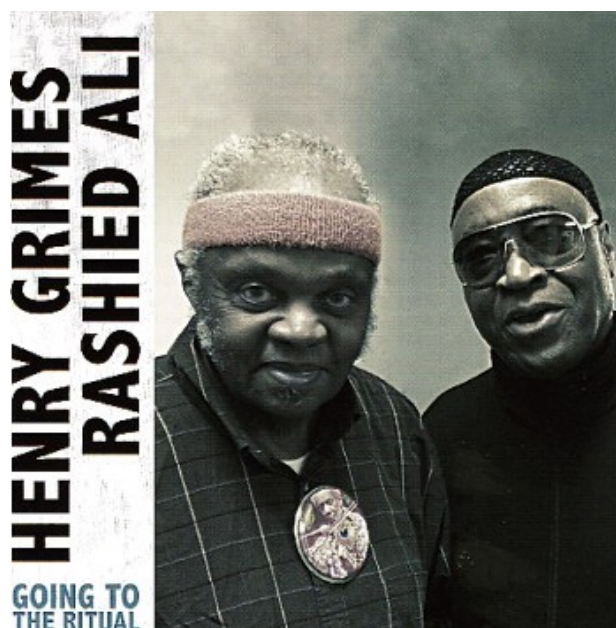
**Personnel:** Fabrizio Bosso: trumpet, electric trumpet; Antonello Salis: piano, accordion, voice

Best known as a fine post-bop trumpeter, Bosso proves well capable of matching Salis' freer inventions, plugging out air-heavy-hisses and pops such as those which open the disc, while Salis' prepared piano emits percussive clacks and rumbles ominously. It's all one continuous performance, which makes it seem much more than what it is – a recital of standards mixed with originals. Rather, it comes across as a kind of stream-of-consciousness journey through a very unique interpretation of jazz history, mixed in with free improvisation and touches of Italian folk music (particularly when Salis switches to accordion).

Given a tendency towards heart-on-sleeve emoting – often, indeed, towards full-blown melodrama – a transition as marked as that between the gloomy drama of 'Before Sunday' and the affirmatory shout of Salis' vocals and accordion playing on the piece immediately following – 'Domenica e Sempre Domenica' – feels perfectly natural; Bosso's trumpet bursting out in majestic melody, Salis' running up and down in accordion-voice sync behind him, glorious release.

'Burst Blues' brings in Bosso's electric trumpet, quoting Herbie Hancock's 'Chameleon'. Things turn joyful here, and album closer 'Besame Mucho' displays a manic exuberance, Bosso's slides and smears and growls amped and echoed up, Salis' voice and accordion underneath, a drunken but colossal folk vision. **(David Grundy)**

## HENRY GRIMES & RASHIED ALI – *GOING TO THE RITUAL*



**Label:** Porter Records

**Release date:** 2008

**Tracklist:** Hidden Forces Aggregate; Eastern Mysticism, Virtue And Calm; Gone Beyond The Gate; This Must Have Always Happened

**Personnel:** Henry Grimes: bass, violin, voice; Rashied Ali: drums

**Additional information:** Recorded in concert at WKCR studios, Columbia University, NYC, 2007

The re-discovery of bassist Henry Grimes 35 years after he vanished from the music scene in 1967 is by now well known but no less astonishing and indeed welcome for that. Grimes was found by Marshall Marotte, a social worker and fan in LA, where he had been living in a small flat, doing such jobs as labourer and janitor, during a long period of self imposed absence and self examination. His bass had long been sold, back in 1968, after landmark recordings with the likes of Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp and Don Cherry amongst many others. After expressing his desire to begin making music again the call for a new bass was answered by fellow bassist William Parker who gave an instrument and much encouragement. Grimes began to practice and after a period of time tentatively re-introduced himself to live playing in a variety of contexts and has been very active once again since 2003.

This CD sees Grimes united with the visionary drummer Rashied Ali, most famously a member of various John Coltrane groups. A meeting of minds and certainly a meeting of equals; two inventive and serious members of the jazz avant-garde, here playing their hearts out and respecting each other and the music.

In addition to bass, Grimes also plays violin and recites one of his spoken word pieces. The spirituality and integrity of Grimes and Ali is beyond doubt and both have been to hard places (especially Grimes) in order to keep the music alive and breathing. The musicians interact as all of their experience would suggest though they never coast and certainly display an earnestness and seriousness with reflects a lifetime of hard work in an uncompromising music and social environments. It is hoped that they are now getting some of the dues that they deserve. I'm not sure that the best way of entering the music of either of these superb musicians is via this particular duo – certainly both have been involved in other less austere surroundings. However, for an unvarnished view of the technique and a close listen to a duo comprising two of the finest rhythm players in jazz, it is a worthwhile exercise.

I can commend wholeheartedly commend Marc Medwin's excellent sleeve notes and hope that you were able to catch the BBC Jazz on 3 broadcast of the Profound Sound Trio (Grimes with Andrew Cyrille and Paul Dunmall). Make an effort to catch either musician in some of their other contexts and above all be very grateful for the news that Henry Grimes is playing once again! These guys are giants of jazz and the new music and but for musicians like them we wouldn't be where we are now. (*Nick Dart*)

**JOEL FUTTERMAN/ IKE LEVIN/ ALVIN FIELDLER –  
TRAVELLING THROUGH NOW**

**Label:** Charles Lester Music

**Release Date:** 2009

**Tracklist:** Primal Center; Illumination; Ascendence; Life's Whisper; Dance of Discovery; Moment Dweller; Outertopeia; Connexions; Triple Question; Freescapes

**Personnel:** Ike Levin: tenor sax, bass clarinet; Joel Futterman: piano, soprano sax; Alvin Fieldler: drums, percussion

Joel Futterman tends to be a somewhat overlooked figure in the free music press: perhaps that's inevitable, given that he plays the sort of high-octane, technically brilliant and thrillingly fast music which inevitably brings to mind comparisons with Cecil Taylor (though his melodic patterning is arguably very different). That's an impression reinforced even more by the fact that he made some important recordings with Taylor's saxophonist of choice, Jimmy Lyons – though this in fact might indicate a *difference* from Taylor, given that Lyons would hardly be happy playing with a pianist dealing in second-hand imitation (particularly as his own groups tended to dispense with keyboard altogether, pairing him with Karen Borca's bassoon and Paul Murphy's drums).

Given, then, that Futterman is undoubtedly worthy of stepping out from Taylor's shadow – given, in fact, that he did so long ago, it's just that the critics haven't moved out with him – any project in which he is involved will always be one to look out for, will be an important event for those with an interest in improvised music which possesses particularly qualities of energy, particular elements of force, and of direct, but varied emphases.

He's certainly in good company here: percussionist Alvin Fieldler is, again, another overlooked musician, but one with a hugely important role in a large slab of African-American creative music in the latter half of the twentieth century, as indicated by Hank Shteamer's online mixtape, presented at the 'Destination...Out' blog a few months ago. Ike Levin, meanwhile, on tenor sax and bass clarinet, seems determined to match everything the other two cook up, while his playing on the quieter sections demonstrates an able command of jazz-based balladry.

Track titles suggest intent and intensity, ambition and desired philosophical weight: 'Illumination', 'Ascendence', 'Life's Whisper', 'Dance of Discovery'. On a more specific level, a short spoken word introduction establishes the music's method: "three different personalities playing – one might be playing slow, one might be burning, the other might be playing just colours. That's the way we normally play." A minute into 'Primal Center', Futterman's roiling melodic figures, rising ever upward from both left and right hands simultaneously, suggest boogie-woogie taken to a particularly manic extreme; over the top, Levin lays down longer notes, and Futterman underneath throws in a little McCoy Tyner as the band transforms into the 1965 John Coltrane Quartet for a few seconds.

But, while, as with Coltrane's group, there's a sense of necessity, of compulsion, this music is by no means a throwback: Futterman is less inclined to stay in one place, on one plane, than McCoy, quickly moving from those dark, shadowy chords to rolling round the upper register or playing with echoes of idiom; sometimes, too, digging out his soprano sax in concordance with Levin, as on the held tones and questing fanfares of 'Illumination'. With the absence of bass, it's often left to Fieldler to fill in that part of the sonic palette – his busy bass drum and Futterman's rumbling left hand, always building to some peak, falling away then back again, ascending, building momentum, or sometimes, just running on the spot, temporarily arresting the music's onward urgent flow, while Levin smears shrill enquiry to the wind.

After the opening few tracks, connections with jazz become more explicit: 'Life's Whisper' moves in and out of being an old-fashioned ballad, though kept at a pitch of tension by Futterman's inside-piano work and by the way he stretches out the pauses between phrases, delaying expectation and suddenly springing the next figure, which might be a chord no less shimmering and lovely for being the sort of thing you *always* find in a ballad feature, or might be a dissonant single note (leaving it open for Levin whether to respond in kind or to resolve into a swooning jazz motif). The jazz connection segues straight over into the next piece, 'Dance of Discovery': a knocking figure from Fieldler's drum-kit asks the question 'where's this going?' as things begin tentatively, mysteriously: slow-paced swing from Levin and Futterman soon falls back into less syncopated, more meditative work, but the pace picks up again, and as the track gathers momentum, Levin's increasingly impassioned bass clarinet improvisations over Fieldler's steady rhythms and Futterman's deliciously inevitable chordal patterns recalls Frank Wright's work with French rhythm sections on the albums 'Kevin, My Dear Son' and 'Shouting the Blues'. What follows is a perfect example of Futterman's ability to turn on a dime from a series of repeated, set chords, to wild, scampering sweeps; and, indeed, on the final track, these two modes seem to grow out of each other, the difference between the two erased in the maelstrom, Futterman pounding out consonant chords with one hand while the other traverses into more 'avant' territory, both simply manifestations of the same impulse, the desire to play *hard*, to play to the limits, whether that means repetition or a frantic, helter-skelter search for new material.

Indeed, if there's anything that characterises 'Travelling Through Now', it's this easy and natural move in and out of idiomatic playing – or rather, from one idiom (relatively 'straight' jazz) to another (free jazz), as if they were the most natural bedfellows (and they are). If the album title suggests something 'just passing through', it would do well to remember that 'now' is where we always are, and as the series of 'nows' captured here go on to exist in more 'nows' as they are played and re-played in who knows how many different contexts, the chain of events is potentially infinite. Being a 'moment dweller', as these three are, might, then, actually be more lasting than other kinds of supposed 'permanence'; an unstable stability, to be sure, but what in life isn't so? (*David Grundy*)

## **PHIL HARGREAVES/ BRUNO DUPLANT/ LEE NOYES – MALACHI**

**Label:** Insubordinations

**Release Date:** 2009

**Tracklist:** porter attention à ce qui va suivre; se lever avant le jour; garder les choses comme elles sont; parfois ne penser à rien; oublier que le temps passé; demander à la poussière; s'aimer le temps d'une éternité; croire que tout est possible; écouter systématiquement son coeur

**Personnel:** Phil Hargreaves: tenor and soprano sax; Bruno Duplant: bass; Lee Noyes: drums, percussion **Additional Information:** Released under a Creative Commons license by Insubordinations netlabel: <http://insubordinations.net>.

Despite the optimistic-sounding titles ('believe that all is possible', 'listen to your heart') the music tends to the brooding and mysterious, Hargreaves' saxophone and Duplant's arco bass unfolding fragments and melodies and fragments of melodies while Noyes works round into the cracks, prodding and poking, leaping and landing. 'Se Lever Avant Le Jour' starts exactly like that; then Noyes ups the volume, crashing, not-keeping-still on either side of the stereo picture. Hargreaves flutters upper register whispers and starts barfing out in little bursts, centring around the initial whispers then alternating hard-edged flurries with shrill shrieks, not forgetting trills, everything kept in suspension as Duplant continues to bow and Noyes falls to near silence, the occasional tap rising up. Duplant's scratchy, see-saw rhythm finds Hargreaves playing with anxious yearning, single notes and simple figures emerging, squeezed out with what sounds like great fragility though the saxophone tone remains tough and firm. The track ends with just Hargreaves, a moment staring into the blur, articulating some inexplicable and inexpressible loss.

The reverie's not so much snapped out of as gradually moved away from: 'garder les choses comme elles sont' opens with what sound like handclaps but which turn out to be slapping sounds from Hargreaves' saxophone. A repeated plucked bass figure from Duplant is half-playful, half-ominous; Noyes' use of his kit demonstrates some delightful lateral-thinking, as he refuses the semblance of a groove by means of gentle yet menacing crashes and thuds, a perfectly-placed strike on the triangle, what sounds like a kind of contained manic approach – great activity, but at a low volume, scratching and rumbling not so much in the background as, again, filtering through textural gaps, bringing out nuances and shades to the other men's playing (to which it would not always seem to 'relate' in a conventional sense).

Three personalities emerge, then: Hargreaves, building variations and near-repetitions to long, held, high tones, sometimes full of delicate yearning, stretching themselves out as long as they can in the hope of grasping some barely-glimpsed essence, sometimes yawping with a beautifully-sustained wild ugliness, the sound of the deliberate mistake, the reed shriek, the multiphonic wail; the embrace of grime, mess, impurity. Perhaps nowhere better is this demonstrated than on 's'aimer le temps d'une éternité', where his saxophone comes to sound almost like a theremin, a quavering, near-melodramatic sound sustained yet unstable, on the verge, on the edge (of crisis and catastrophe more than any easy breakthrough).

Duplant, meanwhile, tends towards repeating figures which one could almost call grooves or 'basslines' – but which are kept from that, which allow the music to move into the free territory it inhabits so well through their rhythmic elasticity, the constant yet almost imperceptible variation of tempo, the ability to sustain mood and atmosphere without falling into the trap of dictating these, allowing Hargreaves the freedom to discourse widely, Noyes to scuttle round edges, breaking twigs, stepping on leaves, leaving no stone unturned. (*David Grundy*)



**JON HASSELL – *LAST NIGHT THE MOON CAME DROPPING ITS CLOTHES IN THE STREET***



**Label:** ECM

**Release Date:** February 2009

**Tracklist:** Aurora; Time and Place; Abu Gil; Last Night the Moon Came; Clairvoyance; Courtrais; Scintilla; Northline; Blue Period; Light on Water

**Personnel:** Jon Hassell: trumpet (1-4, 6, 8-10), keyboard (3, 6); Peter Freeman: bass (1-6, 8-10), percussion (2), guitar (7), samples (9); Jan Bang: live sampling; Rick Cox: guitar (1, 2, 4, 7, 9), strings (4); Jamie Muhoberac: keyboard (1, 2, 4, 9), drums (4, 9); Kheir Eddine M'Kacich: violin (2-5, 7); Pete Lockett: drums (2); Eivind Aarset: guitar (3, 8-10); Helge Norbakken: drums (3, 8, 10); Thomas Newman: strings (4); J. A. Deane: live sampling (6, 7); Steve Shehan: percussion (6, 9).

A word of warning to begin: it's worth nothing that, at over an hour, 'Last Night' is quite a lengthy listen, and, given the uniformity of the ECM production, and the tendency of the rhythm section to noodle a little, it does tend to meander rather too lazily at times – perhaps a little trimming might have helped. Then again, maybe I'm being a little harsh on Eicher's production – after all, I do seem to criticise it whenever I review an ECM release, and by now I should know what to expect, so maybe I'm just being unrealistic, or contrary. In any case, a little heavy reverb is quite nice now and again, and it bathes this music in a soft, hazy glow, a muted radiance which emphasises floating washes of texture rather than picking up on the edges of individual line (title track 'Aurora' is a fine example). That's not to say that detail

isn't picked up: the low rumble of the bass in particular gives the music a sense of direction, a rhythmic edge which it might otherwise lack, compared to, say, Hassell's 1979 release 'Earthquake Island', where a mesmeric tension was generated by the encounter between the introspective trumpet lines and the apparently conflicting rhythmic drive of the repeated jazz-fusion figures in the bass, the crisp handclaps (shades of 'On the Corner', almost), and the insistent percussion.

Speaking broadly, one might say that 'Last Night' is much more about overall atmosphere— a quasi-ambient setting which allows one's attention to drift, only to suddenly focus on an emergent detail (often, the note-bending electric violin figures of Kheir Eddine M'Kacich). Given some further thought, though, it seems obvious that that's always been Hassell's speciality (since he moved away from experimental minimalism and came up with the concept of 'Fourth World' music, in any case). He's not interested in being a virtuoso, spotlighting himself as a jazz or rock musician might, and he demands the same from those in his band, with the result that everyone seems to hang back. The music, therefore, requires something of an adjustment: expecting someone to make a definitive statement, one slowly realises that the real declaration of intent, the real statement, is that which has been unfolding for the last ten minutes without one noticing it – that background haze is the real foreground of this music, and you'd better start listening to it more closely.

This is a great attraction: we're so used to someone standing in front of a bassist and a drummer and proclaiming themselves 'leader' by playing louder and longer than everyone else. Hassell, though is the opposite of an up-front player: his phrases, inflected by the melismatic twists of Indian vocal music and the breathy delicacy of jazz balladeers like Miles Davis or Chet Baker, seem to hang out even after they're over – playing less, but meaning more through it. His tone-control, meanwhile, demonstrates that his lip is in pretty fine shape for a man in his 70s, with further minute and subtle alterations in timbre achieved through electronic attachments: among other things (I think), the octave-divider which Miles experimented with during the 'Jack Johnson' sessions. But whereas Miles used it to create a low-down, dark and dirty groove, transforming his trumpet into something like an electric guitar, Hassell wants to sound like a choir, floating notes into the air like released doves.

Combine this with the use of live sampling and the reverberant production, and you have the kind of texture that probably wasn't possible back when Hassell was in the early stages of creating his trademark sound. Truth be told, the sampling tends to slip into the background much of the time (though at the beginning of 'Northline' and 'Blue Period', it starts to get a little more fractured, or at least, more noticeably crackly and phasered). This is probably the aim: to create something to which you can pay close attention, but which works best as a shifting miasma of elements, interacting with and flowing into each other – the kind of uncertainty experienced at that stage of half-sleep just before you drift off or just after you wake up.

Having said all this stuff about the overall sound being the key, it might be best to end the review with a few particularly notable details: on 'Last Night the Moon,' the string sample, apparently made by guitarist Rick Cox on a portable recorder at another recording session (probably for a film soundtrack, though Hassell isn't sure); on 'Courtrais' the sudden and unexpected appearance of what sounds like birdsong, a fleeting background detail which seems to affect everything Hassell places afterwards (even though, given the way the record was put together, with much layering and altering of the live studio recordings (themselves using various pre-recorded elements), that's likely just to be my fancy, the semblance of something not

really there). Best of all, on the thirteen-minute ‘Abu Gil’, Hassell keeps referencing the opening part of Duke Ellington’s ‘Caravan’, like an itch he can’t quite shake off; an itch which spreads to the other musicians, as the melody keeps threading its way in and out of the texture – hinted at, played with, tossed aside, only for someone else to whisper it back into contention. It’s a bit like the album itself: when it starts to wander, there’s sure to be a fresh twist round the corner, a flash of invention, of unexpected conjunction, the spiraling of new directions out of the old – though those old directions hover like ghosts alongside, never quite disappearing, even if they don’t re-appear in exactly the same form. ‘Soundscape’ might be the word that comes most readily to mind, but I prefer to think of ‘Last Night’ as an overlapping dialogue where whispered words can’t quite be heard, but where something is always being said.

*(David Grundy)*

### MASSIMO MAGEE/ LEE NOYES – ALL ANGLES



**Label:** Array Music

**Release Date:** April 2009

**Tracklist:** DISC 1. Prelude— ‘Round Midnight; Part 1: Lo-Fi—Guitar Solo (Noyes); Friction (Magee); Drums and Sampler Solo (Noyes); Relativity (Magee); Part 2: Patchwork—Patchwork Piece  
DISC 2. Part 3: Live—Live 2; Live 1 [extract]. Postlude— In A Sentimental Mood

**Personnel:** Lee Noyes – Drums, Percussion, Guitar, Sampler, Loops, Tapes, Bells;

Massimo Magee – Tenor, Alto and Sopranino Saxophones, Clarinet, Trumpet, Amplifier with Headphones and Preparations, Keyboard, Tapes, Tape Recorder, Laptop, Homemade and Found Drums and Percussion, Cymbals, Radio, Tube, Bell, Jaw

**Additional Information:** Downloadable from <http://arraymusic.wordpress.com>

Massimo Magee and Lee Noyes, both of whom feature on the MP3 compilation album companion to this issue, have also both been involved in various projects whose genesis in some way began on the freejazz.org website – the multi-musician Cadavre Esquis project and the freejazz.org samplers. Living in Brisbane, Massimo has less opportunity of finding a flourishing free improv community as his counterparts in America or Europe, which has perhaps led to a greater focus on polishing his own solo style, leading to a mastering of orthodox jazz playing and the use of an impressive range of extended techniques.

Given this isolation, the internet has proved an important way of making himself heard, and, alongside the aforementioned freejazz.org projects, he has set up Array Music, a net-label/blog to release his latest recordings, which are often lengthy solo experiments, employing elements of musical vocabulary which have much in common with electro-acoustic improvisation, as well as more linear, jazz-influenced pieces. He writes: “An array is a way of considering manifold possibilities simultaneously. When we are no longer bound by the constraints of time, the past-present-future, the beginning and end, it is then that we must turn to concepts like arrays that allow us to consider all the endless possibilities that would be available to us simultaneously in that one endless moment outside of time. It is in considering this that we might be able to reach something beyond our own earthly existence. Array focuses on improvisation as a tool for attempting to touch that state outside of time by examining these endless possibilities.” In practice, this means a laudable generic openness (without by any means adopting a scattershot or unfocussed approach), a willingness and an ability to test out a multiplicity of instrumental approaches and of different instruments.

‘All Angles’, the tenth release on Array, mixes Magee’s solo work with that of New Zealander Lee Noyes, as well as featuring collaborations between the two men. Divided into three sections, it’s clear that there’s something of a constructive plan behind the collection of pieces, rather than simply throwing together haphazard moments. Thus, the first section uses some deliberately lo-fi recordings, apparently arising from Magee and Noyes’ desire to recreate the ambience of 1980s experimental cassette tape releases. In some ways this feels rather too artificial, but I suppose it’s no more artificial an aesthetic choice than the way most musicians choose to present their recordings, and, while one could argue that the obscuring of detail that the lo-fi medium tends to encourage mitigates against the textural subtlety of this music, in practice, it provides a nicely rough edge to the improvisations. This is particularly the case with Noyes’ rhythmic ‘Guitar Solo’, where creaks and scrapes, fingerpicking twangs and snappy harmonics, give it the quality of a field recording, invoking the ghostly presence of vinyl hiss – such a vital part of the way we hear much folk music – while at the same time remaining true to the reality of the improvised moment (the blare of an MSN sound alert is left in, unedited), rather than falsely archaic.

The vocalised harmonics three minutes into Magee’s tenor sax solo ‘Friction’ come out as particularly unearthly given the lo-fi recording method, while the clicks and pops of his fingerwork sound out, not with the resonance of natural chambers, as in John Butcher’s recent work, but with a kind of boxy, constricted quality that intensifies their hardness, their physical strength and impact. At times, Magee’s playing calls to mind feed squeaking on a polished floor, the clatter of claws from animals’ rushing feet on wooden floorboards; at others, it is intensely vocalised, with some particular startling, screaming yawps which are exhilarating but also almost threatening.

The shrill circularities of the following soprano solo, 'Relativity', while often piercing, take place within a somewhat lighter sonic environment: the slight background buzz (which could be traffic roar, or a more natural sound) affords a greater space, a less claustrophobic setting for lines which swirl round ideas in which can be found the joy of constant invention. Tumbling note cascades shrill up to repeated, bird-like calls (there's a particularly notable example six minutes in), exploiting the soprano's capacity for clarity and its beguiling, sometimes dizzying upper-register possibilities.

Another Noyes solo, for drums and sampler, is more spacious and fleeting yet, distant squeaks and echoes, clangs and cymbal crashes never assuming the linear melodic single-mindedness of Magee's improvisations.

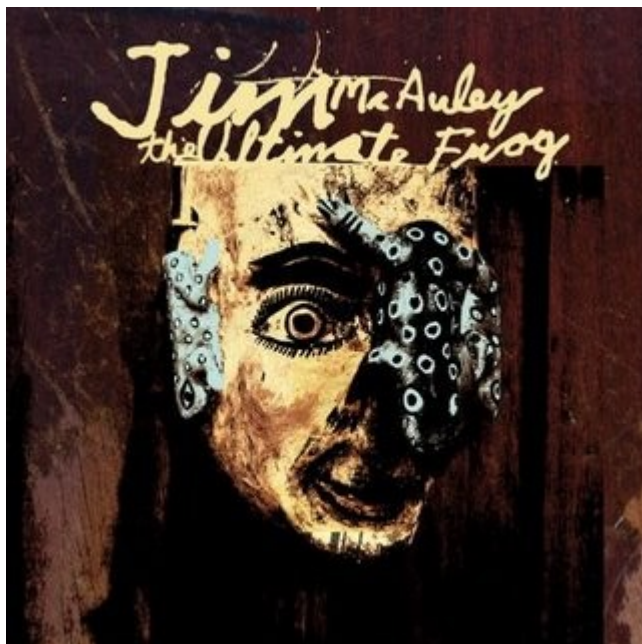
Part Two, 'Patchwork Piece', the longest track on the album so far, would seem to have been constructed via e-mail collaboration (given the title). While the solos preceding it tended to be more developmental and strongly focussed on where they were going – unhesitatingly directional – this begins much more slowly, electronic sounds punctuating silences with noisy bursts alternately harsh and strident. A keyboard improvisation four minutes in battles silence, trilling up to cluster chords, arpeggiating into more melodious territory, is joined by high, sine-like drones and Noyes' quasi-militaristic snare-playing, before distorting into a barrage of sharp noise, a higher and more piercing sine tone, the chipmunk whiz of a tape machine with the fast-forward button held down. Cassette tape buzz, magnified up in the mix over a yawping saxophone improvisation, gives way to a drum solo, again slightly militaristic, concentrating as it does on a regular, repeating pulse. Saxophone re-enters and dominates the mix, the whole texture always altering underneath – sometimes guitar, sometimes keyboard, sometimes drums – the music never content to pursue any one direction at the expense of other possibilities. A fade-out on what sounds like yet another new section, at the end of the piece, indicates that the conversation is far from over, the musical potential far from exhausted.

The second disc contains Part 3, the album's live section. Once more, things start in dialogue with silence, buzzes and hisses and whines from Noyes matched by Magee, who is trying, it seems, to make his saxophone sound as electronic as possible. The use of pre-recorded (or perhaps live sampled) sounds adds to the textural complexity and unpredictability of the music, while not detracting from its curious, almost trance-like pull, as Magee breathes out a sustained single note with a lonely persistence that here passes for the most human and lovely sound available. Compared to the 'patchwork' collaboration, this is more focussed, more attuned to the moment, rather than busy with the buzz of electronically-stitched possibilities; it's the sort of synchronicity and collaborative sensitivity that's only really possible given real-time interaction within the same acoustic space.

Another, briefer excerpt from a live recording begins with Noyes alternating foreboding picked guitar figures and distorted strums, Magee dramatically holding notes and overblowing in tandem. An aural jump cut finds Magee now playing trumpet with the brassy insouciance of a Donald Ayler, the faint sound of his soprano sax unobtrusively sampled in the background, Noyes now in gentler, acoustic fingerpicking mode. It's an odd but rather effective textural combination.

The album opened with one jazz warhorse, 'Round Midnight', rendered as a rather sprightly and perhaps also rather fraught lo-fi showcase for soprano and drums; 'In a Sentimental Mood' ends proceedings, Magee's clarinet more flowing and lyrical, Noyes' acoustic guitar picking lines around his companion's effulgent melodicisms in more inquisitive fashion. (*David Grundy*)

## JIM McAULEY – *THE ULTIMATE FROG*



**Label:** Drip Audio

**Release Date:** 2008

**Tracklist:** DISC 1 – Improvisation # 12; nika's Love Ballad; Improvisation # 5; November Night; Improvisation # 1; Escape Tones; A Ditty for NC; Improvisation #6; The Zone of Avoidance; Froggy's Magic Twanger; Huddie's Riff; Il Porcellino; DISC 2– Jump Start; Improvisation # 9; Bullfrogs and Fireflies; Successive Approximations; Improvisation # 11; Five'll Get Ya' Ten; Work with Warp; "no snare!"; Improvisation # 10; Angie Moreli Truly Confesses; Okie Dokie; For Rod Poole

**Personnel:** Jim McAuley: guitar; Leroy Jenkins: violin, viola; Nels Cline: guitar; Alex Cline: percussion; Ken Filiano: bass

Probably best known playing as part of the 'Acoustic Guitar Trio' with Nels Cline and Rod Poole, Jim McAuley here appears in duet with a number of other musicians, including Cline (and his brother, Alex). Poole was murdered in 2007, and the disc ends with a short tribute. Leroy Jenkins, too, died before the album's release (his contributions were recorded much earlier than the others, back in 2002), and it's a nice opportunity to hear once more the way his violin and viola lines sing out with confidence and with strength.

Like Jenkins, McAuley is a melodic acoustic player, but he isn't afraid of more 'avant' sounds. Nate Dorward's liners note how sympathetic a playing partner McAuley is, his personal, private-seeming approach (which isn't so much reservation as an intense awareness of self) not precluding the ability to interact with others. This is an innerness which is not compromised by reaching out; which may, in fact, know itself *more* fully for having shared and stretched itself outside the confines of the closed-off individual, of solipsism. As a whole, McAuley's playing makes the record sound quite folksy, almost Americana-ish at times, but he's never happy to settle into that mode, employing a variety of techniques and sounds, with plenty of twanging and slide guitar as well as harmonics and Bailey-esque spacings and shadings. Mostly, he alternates between the realms of the quiet and mysterious or more scrabbly explorations.

Disc One opens with Jenkins displaying his elegance and keen melodic sense as ever, while 'Nika's Love Ballad' has the grace and tenderness one might expect from the title, Nels Cline and McAuley quietly strumming; a second duet with Jenkins is frantic and shorter. 'November Night' is the first piece to feature percussion, but is the quietest yet, Alex Cline's bells complementing McAuley's own bell-like guitar. As the track proceeds, McAuley starts to spin out more lines, more notes, but it all unfolds absolutely at its own pace, as unhurried as it can be. There's a certain pathos to it, the spinning out of remembered sorrow, wistfully contemplating events floating past on reverberations of bells, events threading together on spirals of memory. There spins a story, darker, lower guitar scramblings leading to gongs, rising winds, then higher melody chimes to rest.



The third Jenkins duet sounds like it might be hinting at jazz; with pizzicato violin and plucking guitar it's a scrabbly-jazz flavoured improv at first before Jenkins starts bowing with that characteristic tone of his and it turns flowing, violin melody lines over guitar accompaniment, ending beautifully as Jenkins repeats high notes with guitar harmonics punctuating the silent background.

'Escape Tones' marks the first appearance of bassist Ken Filiano, tracing parallel, nicely symmetrical lines alongside McAuley. 'Ditty for NC', their second collaboration, finds McAuley exploring bell sonorities reminiscent of 'November Night', but with more of a gamelan tinge. Seesaw bowed bass and a repeating dark guitar pattern take over, before the mood turns to wonder with tinkling guitar and yearning high arco playing. A 'solemn jazz' bass solo in the vein of Dave Holland's 70s work dies away into more 'seesaw' playing before McAuley ends it.

The sixth improvisation with Leroy Jenkins opens with solo violin; upon entering, McAuley takes an accompanying role, echoing and shading Jenkins' playing with some twangy, Beefheart-esque sounds, interspersed with more picky textural material. There's a lot of variety to the accompaniment but it never sounds pick 'n mix, and it always manages to relate to what Leroy's doing. The longest track on the disc, at over 7 minutes, it ends with Jenkins' repeating high pitches.

'The Zone of Avoidance' has quiet, almost-bleak guitar sprinkled with harmonics and tripping melody through chromaticism and fret squeaks. Once Ken Filiano enters, McAuley's playing expands out to high yearning before the piece ends in similar vein to that which it begun.

It's nice to hear an improv disc which concentrates on short, crafted tracks such as the above – not that this in any way limits their freedom or imaginative scope; rather, they're like small, extremely well-crafted artefacts, existing in their small scale for what they are, touching on varieties of textural combinations, harmonic, melodic and rhythmic developments, modes of musical thought and emotional pull. Whether it's accompanied by certainty or uncertainty, there's always a strong sense of purpose. In fact, it often sounds as though a written melody opens the tracks in some cases, so that we have is almost theme-solos-theme: or perhaps simply an ability to remember and to return, to give the tracks a pleasing circular developmental aspect, though at times things are more open-ended, the way they subside suggesting future possibility rather than the exhaustion of a particular set of ideas.

'Froggy's Magic Twanger' finds McAuley and Cline exploiting some alternative guitar textures: their combined glassy strums sound as if they might suddenly shatter and disappear. Balalaika tinkling, tactile jingling. Things turn increasingly ominous as low rumbles offset the higher pitches (Nate Dorward's liners describe this section as a "dark hullabaloo").

Alex Cline's percussion enters almost imperceptibly a minute into 'Huddie's Riff'; he then determines to make the occasional crashing, non-standard drum sound while McAuley runs away with repeating low slide guitar, stopping before it reaches too much of a frenzy and his slide turns twangy, as (perhaps) he imagines himself sailing down the river just as 'Deliverance' is about to get nasty. Cline is still there with hovering cymbals and all sorts of busy sounding things. The near-random force of his percussive strikes somehow still manages to sync with the guitar, a combination which increasingly comes to resemble a spirited stomp that's somehow gone wrong. After that, this first disc ends with 'Il Porcellino', a thoughtful-sounding solo track.

By way of contrast, the 'Jump Start' to disc two is a playful duet with Nels Cline, in which both guitarists play noticeably separate lines much more than on the previous tracks. Things become a little more wonderingly exploratory, a little more

mysterious in mood. A ninth improvisation with Leroy Jenkins is again playful, pizzicato violin in tandem with scrabbly guitar. Ken Filiano's bowed drone bass on 'Bullfrogs and Fireflies' changes the pace: like Disc One's 'November Night', with which it shares titular affinities, its hanging sounds approximate silence, a filled space which seems endlessly open and free. The most serene track for a while, it does turn a little more sombre as McAuley starts playing slide, and the mood is once more mysterious on 'Sucessive Approximations', as he picks his way carefully over Filiano's arco harmonics. Leroy Jenkins' playing on 'Improvisation # 11' is again jazz tinged and melodic, with McAuley taking more of an accompanying role; on 'Five'll Get Ya Ten', it's Alex Cline's turn to be the more understated of the playing partners, with McAuley spinning out lyrical patterns.

Moving on via 'avant' sounds on the double-guitar 'Warp', 'No Snare' finds Alex Cline's drums a little busier, though that's a relative assessment: Cline never really plays loud, and neither is he obtrusively or squarely rhythmic – rather, he seems at all times to be concerned with extracting the most appropriate and varied textures he can.

'Improvisation # 10' – bowed guitar and breathy viola: if it was possible to make a bow sliding over animal gut sound like a human mouth, Leroy Jenkins could find a way, testing his instrument's capacities at the same time as evincing a profound respect for its limitations, playing to its strengths, as it were. It feels as if there is a lot compressed into this track, a lot of (dare one call it emotional?) pressure. That the piece doesn't implode under the weight of all this *stuff* that's brought to it is testament to the musicians' unwavering focus.

Another of the ballad/mysterious pieces, 'Angie Moreli Truly Confesses'; 'Okie Dokie', a purposeful beginning and a nice meaty improv with Filiano refusing to merely 'accompany', giving the guitar solo a real propulsive urgency, creating conditions in which the music cannot stand still.

And then the album closes on a poignant note, with McAuley's solo tribute to Rod Poole. Is the sound of falling rain at the beginning really a necessary adjunct to the piece which speaks for itself? Well, it is hard to deny that it adds something, gives the track an intimate feel, as if McAuley was just picking away in his room on a dark day when it seemed to be thoughts of his absent friend that made the skies grey as much as any cloud formations. *(David Grundy)*

## NILS PETTER MOLVAER – *HAMADA*



**Release Date:** 2009

**Label:** Sula Records

**Tracklist:** Exhumation; Sabkah; Icy Altitude; Friction; Monocline; Soft Moon Shine; Monocline Revisited; Cruel Altitude; Lahar; Anticline

**Personnel:** Nils Petter Molvaer: trumpet, voices, percussion, programming; Eivind Aarset: guitar, bass, programming; Jan Bang: live sampling, field recording, programming; Audun Erlein: bass; Audun Kleive: drums

I've always been quite fond of Nils Petter Molvaer's wispy trumpet melodies and ambient atmospheres, though I must admit I've tended to encounter them only in passing, and my appreciation couldn't thus be described as either that of a true 'fan' or a particularly informed critic. So I tried an experiment, playing Molvaer's 2002 album 'NP3' back-to-back with this latest offering from 2009. In an interview on the All About Jazz website, Molvaer describes 'NP3' as his angriest album, and hints at a political dimension which he perceives in the way he works: "just playing music—that's communication at a very high level. Working together to make something sound good, working together to make the other people sound better, more honest—this sort of interaction is, to me, a political act, especially in contrast to this chaos we're living in." Coming in the midst of a discussion on the use of samples, this pricks up one's ears – but, while I'm not asking for conceptual music or for a really stringent socio-politico-cultural-geographical-anthropological approach (no, really, I'm not!), the reality is that even looking for a smaller challenge or attempt at engagement is going to be disappointing. Making the music 'political' seems to be limited to the second track, 'Axis of Ignorance', where the voices of fundamentalist preachers are sampled alongside a set of beats which are a little more crunky and hard-edged than usual. There's also a video of a 20-minute NPV live performance which ends by sampling 'Bushwhacked', British satirist Chris Morris' cut-up of George Bush's state of the union address. In itself, 'Bushwhacked' is a masterly piece of work, bitter yet with a fierce some of humour that is, occasionally, perversely childish, without losing its politico-polemical edge (Bush, for instance, is made to say "The American flag stands for corporate scandals, recession, stock market declines, blackmail, burning with hot irons, mutilation with electric drills, cutting out tongues, terror, mass murder, and rape", but also, more absurdly, "we must offer every child in America three nuclear missiles"). Yet just to play it underneath some beats and trumpet atmospherics doesn't seem to me the most political act, doesn't seem to do much more than invoke politics as a surface, an afterthought, an add-on, rather than something sunk deep into the marrow of form.

So, I played 'NP3' alongside 'Hamada' and trying to distinguish any major stylistic, structural or textural shifts. The 'political' bent seems to be gone in favour of atmosphere; while the reviews I've read have described it as being very dark and challenging, to me it sounds pretty similar to the rest of his output – melancholic (the ambient 'Icy Altitude'), mysterious and cryptic (the opening of 'Friction'), fragile and delicate ('Soft Moon Shine').

Well, is it beautiful? Yes, a little bit, maybe, whatever beauty means - let's substitute 'pretty' in for that, it's pretty and calming and those self-help kind of things, introspective and moody as we like it when we put on our 'Miles Davis for Lovers' compilations. And at moments Miles really does seem to be in the house, which isn't really pastiche on NPV's part, his sidling breathy muffled whines and soft songs are established as his own now and he does them well. Perhaps too well, and perhaps too often, though: it's just too predictable. When the beats whip up and the guitar rips out some distortion and shreds a bit (on the second half of 'Friction' and on 'Cruel Altitude') one has to ask, if that burst of guitar sounds ferocious, isn't that just because the rest of the album is otherwise too monotone, too one-track? Apart from the aforementioned exceptions, each piece is virtually indistinguishable from the next; 'Hamada' *forces* one into background listening, forces one to shy away from detail or even some broader, yet still engaged zone of activity. It neatly spreads itself out as aural wallpaper which looks a little edgy but which doesn't ultimately have very much to it. And those exceptions, those explosions, are very managed explosions,

brief highs to enable one's blood to rise a little so that the next incline feels like a gentle release, a gentle float down to calmer climes rather than a let-down, yet another melodic and peaceful, gently sorrowful piece keeping us in the valley when we want to climb the mountain for a more interesting view.

NPV is playing jazz lines a lot of the time (albeit from a rather strange perspective, which, like Arve Henriksen, builds on the quiet, ballad aspects of Miles Davis and takes that as the supreme starting point), but the background isn't jazz – OK, nothing wrong with that. But let's compare Jon Hassell's latest, which, on the surface, is pretty similar in its combination of electronic trumpet musings with ambient backgrounds and occasionally faster paced beats. NPV's sense of texture is far less acute: too often, it feels that the other musicians are simply delivering backgrounds, occasionally spiced up with a 'world music' field-recording, for him to play over - even though, it must be said, he's not a flashy jazz soloist. Hassell, meanwhile, manages to integrate himself a lot more into the overall texture, so that the music feels more like real-time interaction or even post-production crafted interaction – for example, the way the band toss around the motif of Duke Ellington's 'Caravan' on 'Abu Gil'. There's nothing really comparable on 'Hamada'. And it must be noted that, whereas Hassell's rhythmic sense comes from years of studying and thinking about the musics of other cultures, NPV owes a lot more to the far more simplistic assimilation of rhythmic ideas into modern pop. The problem for me is that, while the sheer overburdening of repetition, the manic, mechanical, super-fast thrash found in the more extreme forms of modern electronic/dance music (let's say, the usual suspects - Aphex Twin, Autechre, Squarepusher), is trying to accomplish something specific which can be remarkably compelling within its own limits and contexts, NPV is simply using the basic sounds of such music as something to go underneath some inoffensive trumpet playing which kills its thrust and momentum stone dead, which neutralizes it, sterilizes it. Even the opportunities to soar into a delicately anthemic climax à la the better moments of Jaga Jazzist are skipped – 1:40 into second track 'Sabkah,' a soft wash of sound beautifully compliments Molvaer's trumpet lines, but drops out almost as soon as it appeared – it's a telling sense of hesitancy, of holding back, or simply of too much comfort, of staying inside the confines that one sketched out for oneself years ago and outside which one feels no particular inclination to stray. (*David Grundy*)

## **JOE MORRIS - *WILDLIFE***

**Label:** AUM Fidelity

**Release Date:** 2009

**Tracklist:** Geomantic; Thicket; Crow; Nettle

**Personnel:** Petr Cancura: alto and tenor saxophones; Joe Morris: double bass; Luther Gray: drums

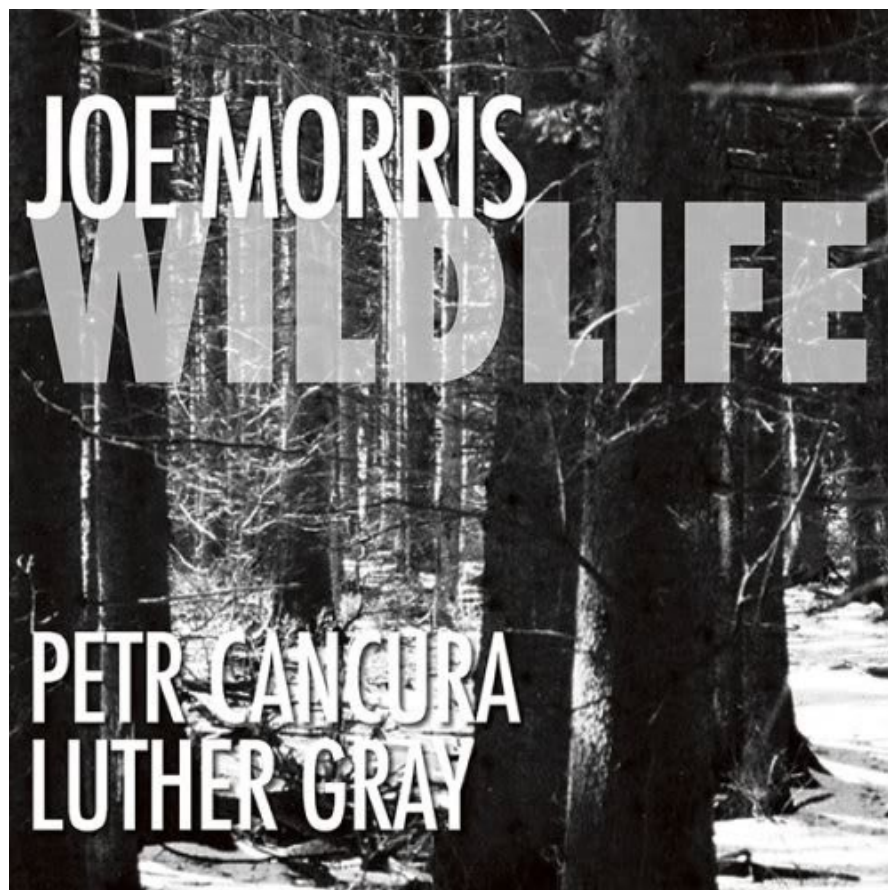
Joe Morris is widely known as the improvising guitarist who rigorously avoids all extended techniques, 'effects' and noise elements from his playing to concentrate on harmonic, melodic, rhythmic and dynamic methods of non-repetitive musical interaction. Here he breaks new ground by playing the whole album on double bass. It's still what is usually known as *freebop*, improvised from beginning to end. To call the overall method of working 'time no changes' would not be too much of an exaggeration, even if the *walking* style Morris cultivates is fluid enough to accommodate all the changing inventions of his colleagues. There is none of William Parker's endlessly volatile style of ensemble playing.

To quote from the liner notes:- 'Wildlife improvises openly and collectively. Sometimes a fundamental musical idea can be enough to offer clear direction. Tempo, relation to pulse, line, repetition or the decision to change direction might be all we use or need...' Morris, as might be expected, uses no extended techniques, nor does he even bow. Cancura uses multiphonics occasionally, as well as vocalizing his timbre, but hints of all-out mayhem of the 'power trio' persuasion are only hints here; the intensity simmers, below the surface maybe. Gray's drumming stays relatively muted too, even on his solo spots. Morris's solos are not unduly extraverted either; not for him the flamboyance of a Mingus or a Barry Guy, but he works out his ideas clearly and logically, not that the level of virtuosity approaches his guitar technique.

On the longest track *Thicket* (not as dense as the title might suggest) he introduces proceedings with what might be called a polyrhythmic ostinato, and the harmonic development is reminiscent of a free take on modal improvising, with a strong flavour of 1970s New York lofts.

Morris has played live little enough in Britain, and the recording that was made during his 1996 visit with Hession/Wilkinson/Fell revealed, despite some highly engaging moments, something akin to 'language difficulties' or differences in idiom. In 2007 he performed again with Simon Fell at the Vortex in London and, given the venue's mediocre (at best) acoustics and ambience, some remarkable music was played. The other musicians, Tim Berne, Gail Brand and Steve Noble seemed to achieve a better *blend*. Of course the best musical setting for Morris in this country would, I think, be the circle of players loosely associated with Gary Coombes, Neil Metcalfe, John Rangelcroft, Gary Todd and Nick Stephens.

What we really need is more venues where this kind of music can be heard every night into the small hours. (*Sandy Kindness*)



## PHOSPHOR – *PHOSPOR II*

**Label:** potlach

**Release Date:** 2009

**Tracklist:** P7; P8; P9; P10; P11; P12

**Personnel:** Burkhard Beins: percussion, objects, small electrics; Axel Dorner: trumpet, electronics; Robin Hayward: tuba; Annette Krebs: guitar, objects, electronics, tape; Andrea Neumann: inside piano, mixing board; Michael Renkel: prepared nylon string acoustic guitar via computer; Ignaz Schick: turntable, objects, bows

**Additional Information:** Recorded Tesla, Berlin, September 2006

Hiss. Scratch. Drag of needle on vinyl, click, buzz, blowing breath. ‘P7’ sounds in some way industrial. Activity might be too strong a word for it; it’s more like the technological apparatus in David Lynch’s ‘Eraserhead’, always threatening some action (maybe even catastrophic) but never quite breaking out into that, locked in constant tension. Later in the track, one jazz guitar chord. It sounds wonderful, isolated in this context. No need to follow it up. Just another sound, not even a consciously deployed generic element, no need for that sort of thing. The structure is extremely well-managed, small examples throwing into sudden clarity just how much control the musicians have in their freedom: the same mouthpiece blow with which Dorner opened the record sounds again after a longish silence half-way through, almost like a return to a theme. Again, this need not and does not translate into a pattern or precedent: it’s just there as itself, in the moment it takes to sound out, and then something else has taken its place.

Similarly, on ‘P11’, when Dorner actually blows a couple of recognisable, conventional trumpet notes on the fifth track, the shock (or the catch in the throat) thus provoked is not dwelt on. The atmosphere is almost melancholic, a singing bell sounds, a triangle taps, lonely in isolation. It’s not sustained: radiator hiss, swishing metal pan, harrumphing – another zone entered, quietly left before it establishes itself too comfortably.

‘P8’: at first, sustained, quiet but piercing sine tones dominate. Hayward’s tuba is thus far playing the ‘conventional instrument’ role the most out of anyone’s, although mostly that just means single notes as one small element in the overall hissing texture. A few minutes in, it issues what develops into a drone-like section, not ‘atmospherics’ in the vein the word ‘drone’ might imply, but still, as close to atmospherics as this disc gets, and lovely for it. A really sharp and loud scratching sound rips the veil without completely shredding it asunder, allows nothing to be too serenely unquiet.

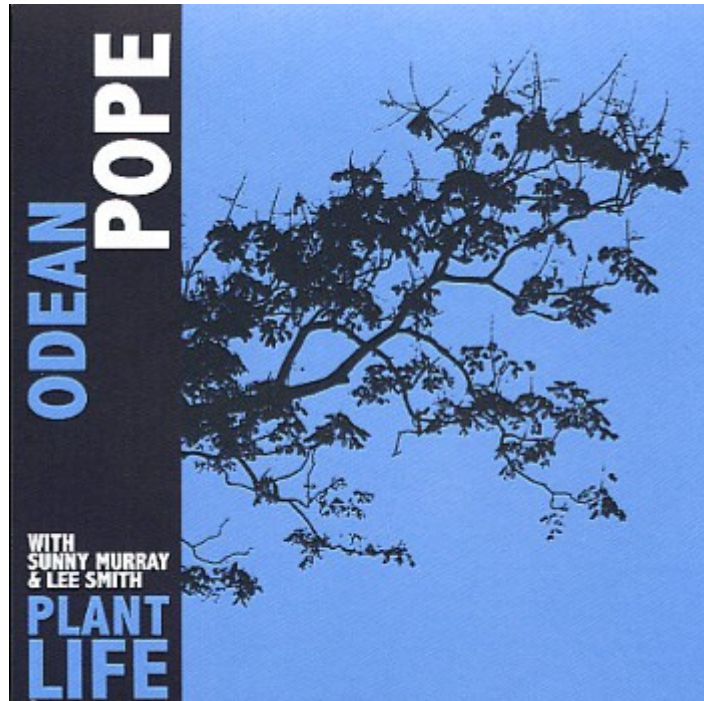
‘P9’: musical boxes, little pinging metal tones, guitar strums, Weberian uncertainty, barely. Buzzes. Things building, then Dorner’s *loud* aeroplane take-off imitation (as on the first piece of his mesmerising solo album, ‘Trumpet’), far from the near-serene delicacies with which the track began. High, bird-tweet rhythmic patterns: like lots of the sounds here, these sound as if they’ve emerged from small machines set in motion, re-constructed loops, a workshop of mechanical miniatures.

The group that made this album is fairly large, and the restraint displayed throughout is impeccable. Even those sections (not so much ‘climaxes’) loud enough to be particularly intense and near-devastating in impact (when heard on headphones) are often initiated and sustained by just one person, most often Dorner. Transitions are so delicate that one wonders whether they can really be called ‘transitions’ at all; full attention is therefore needed to appreciate the full range of sonic events, and the relations between them. Yet when such close concentration is applied, it becomes



clear that this music does not risk loss; rather, it is blessed with absolute clarity, its textures often a challenge – as they must be, in order to avoid too much ready comfort – but always a real pleasure. (*David Grundy*)

### ODEAN POPE – *PLANT LIFE*



**Label:** Porter Records

**Release date:** 2008

**Tracklist:** Two Dreams Part 1; Happiness Tears; Plant Life; I Want To Talk About You; Scorpio Twins; Thoughts; Multiphonic; Two Dreams Part 2

**Personnel:** Odean Pope: tenor saxophone; Sunny Murray: drums; Lee Smith: bass

**Additional information:** All compositions by Pope, except Happiness Tears and I Want To Talk About You by Murray. Recorded at Rittenhouse Recording, Philadelphia May 18<sup>th</sup> 2008

Many readers will have first become familiar with Odean Pope through his tenure with the Max Roach Quartet. This trio finds Pope playing with another drummer of similarly legendary status, this time the free jazz firebrand veteran Sunny Murray. This is at first hearing a workmanlike and honest run through of a number of original themes from three excellent musicians which whilst being solid does not distinguish itself from many similar efforts. However, further listenings reveal subtleties in every piece and Murray is exceptional throughout, using his vast experience to move the trio along whilst never playing explicitly on the beat – a truly remarkable man.

The set is bookended by versions of Pope's song Two Dreams and on the first version the theme is played in a slow stately manner before being improvised on and underpinned by strong walking bass from Smith. After a drum and bass interlude the theme is restated at a slightly faster pace before Murray brings the piece to a close. Happiness Tears is the first of Murray's songs, the theme being somehow clumsy but superbly cushioned by Murray himself – concentrate just on Murray's playing and try to work out how he relates to the written notes and improvising of Pope and Smith!

The title track lopes along at a bossa nova pace and Smith locks into a groove to which Murray responds with as near to a regular pulse as he gets on this CD. Pope



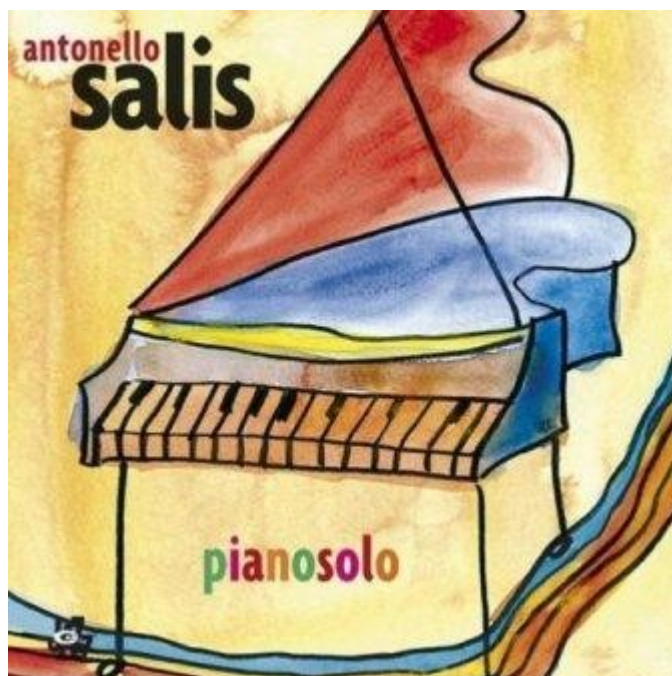
is tonally strong throughout and contributes original scores which enable Smith and Murray to contribute equally to the fabric of the music.

I Want To Talk About You is almost definitively how a jazz ballad should sound and it's instructive to think that it came from Murray's pen. An improvising drummer and contributor to so many free jazz ensembles over forty odd years he has also clearly amassed excellent compositional technique as well. Pope's reading of the song is sensitive and the piece sounds as if it could have come from almost any period in the development of jazz. Murray is inventive throughout; he never seems to play the same fill twice; and Smith includes several quotes from standards in his solo.

Sorption Twins commences with a Smith bass introduction before Pope and Murray enter with Pope playing in unison with Smith. Pope's Coltrane influence are evident as he works improvises on the theme before bringing it to a close. Thoughts contains quite simply Pope's standout playing on the CD. It is played solo using circular breathing and multiphonic techniques and interest doesn't waver. Sensitive recording captures the entire instrument, including pad movements and this ballad is every bit as good as Murray's though containing, almost by definition, more of Pope. Multiphonic starts with arco bass which gives way to plucking before Pope's entry above scattering rhythmic tattoos from Murray. Smith's arco then follows Pope closely as the song develops and his personality is allowed to surface more readily than on any of the other tracks.

Two Dreams finishes the set in duo fashion, with Murray seemingly not on the track. This CD may not immediately grab you and demand attention but over the course of a number of listens it is well worth persevering with – a tenor led trio which will reward your patience. (*Nick Dart*)

### ANTONELLO SALIS – *PIANOSOLO*



**Label:** CAM Jazz

**Release Date:** February 2006

**Tracklist:** Zuraba Blue; Cerra al Libertador; Con L'Acqua Alla Golla; Totem; To My Wife; Hola; La Dolce Vita; Salismaninoff; Graffo di Costa; Nightmare N.20; Financial Time

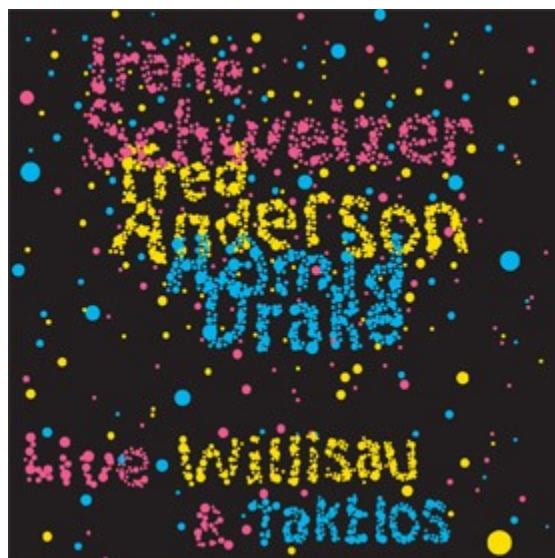
**Personnel:** Antonello Salis: piano, voice

Sardinian pianist Antonello Salis is, I must admit, a recent discovery for me, my acquaintance with the Italian scene mostly being limited to players who tend to work in more mainstream contexts, such as the trumpeters Enrico Rava and Paolo Fresu. On the evidence of this disc, though, and of his the more recent duet recording with another trumpeter, Fabrizio Bosso, I may have some serious catching up to do.

This solo outing alternates between swooning jazz-ballad runs, thick, dense, low-register clusters (Salis seems particularly fond of the lower area of the keyboard, utilising for a number of different effects and in a number of different contexts), percussive prepared piano playing, and the hearty, deliberately exaggerated pounding out of melodies. Salis' total commitment to the music he's making doesn't mean an entirely serious focus: or, rather, he demonstrates a generous spirit, a loveable directness, an emotionalism and brash risk-taking which – dare one say it – can seem a little vulgar at times, though more often than not it entirely succeeds in sweeping one up in its flow.

There's plenty of humour, as when he accompanies his piano playing with some gargling on 'Con L'Acqua Alla Golla'. The voice, in fact, is an important part of the whole experience, imparting a real sense of physical engagement to the playing that manages to translate through the recorded medium. One might contrast the way he sings along to Keith Jarrett's similar vocalisations; in Jarrett's case, the singing is part of a whole manner of introversion, a total concentration, the public manifestation of a very private loss into another world, whereas Salis is determined to take everyone else along with him into that world. While this means that he's perhaps a little more slapdash than Jarrett (or maybe just more loose), the ultimate feel is of a great pleasure being taken in what is being done, of a great joy that travels from musician to listener in warm-hearted exchange. (*David Grundy*)

**IRENE SCHWEIZER/ FRED ANDERSON/ HAMID DRAKE –  
WILISAU AND TAKTLOS**



**Label:** Intakt

**Release Date:** 2007

**Tracklist:** A Former Dialogue; Trinity; Schwandrake; Wilisau

**Personnel:** Fred Anderson: tenor sax (tracks 2-4); Irène Schweizer: piano; Hamid Drake: drums

**Additional Information:** Recorded August 28, 2004 at Jazzfestival Willisau by Schweizer Radio DRS2 and March, 28, 1998 at Taktlos-Festival Zürich.

The opening track is a 20-minute dialogue for Schweizer and Drake, and Cecil Taylor's many duets with drummers immediately spring to mind, but of course aren't slavishly adhered to in the slightest. The piece is beautiful for its constant invention, Drake matching Schweizer's energy in boiling waves of sound. Schweizer's preference is for a dialogue between hands – she'll play a phrase higher up the keyboard and then answer it, either by repeating it or producing some recognisable variation on it, lower down: or the process will be reversed. If that sounds somewhat mechanical, in fact, it's a technique so internalised as a means of musical thinking that it occurs at lightning speed. About seventeen minutes into the consistently intense duo, Schweizer's playing segues into jazz in a way that's both utterly unpredictable and totally inspired; in truth, it was signalled three minutes earlier, as the thickness of her assault began to imperceptibly become less dense, her dizzying right hand runs accompanied with some gorgeous thick chords. Her playing becomes more and more spacious until she drops out altogether, leaving Drake to draw the line between edgy fleet-footedness and pummelling, cymbal-accentuated waves which build themselves up into faster and louder clusters of energy before dropping back slightly for the next go. Schweizer's return is at once crushing and limpid, sonorous left-hand melodic statements giving at once an air of finality and preparing us for more.

Fred Anderson's playing isn't always my cup of tea, it has to be said – I find a little wearing his recourse to be-bop vocabulary and to particularly licks which tend to get repeated several times in every solo he plays – but he's on top form here, going places I wouldn't have guessed he was capable of. Whereas in his preferred trio format, he tends to coast a little, bass and drums (often Drake, in fact) locking into easy or hard grooves over which he can blow as he knows, here, Schweizer makes that impossible. It's not that she forces either Anderson or Drake to go 'her way'; more, her spirit of restless invention motivates them to reach similar levels of musical agility, improvisational athleticism.

She begins 'Trinity' as she ended 'A Former Dialogue', with granite, stylised bass-register melodies. Tinkling Cecil Taylor licks, bolstered up by Drake's loud rolls, bring in Anderson and saxophone and piano exchange streams of molten melody, Schweizer alternating between strongly rhythmic and jazzy runs which provoke Anderson to some of his harshest honks, as if to disassociate himself from the be-bop aspects of his musical vocabulary which Schweizer at one moment encourages, the next refuses (for her playing rarely stays still, never focuses on just one place, one area of musical activity). The drops and rises in this dialogue are just mesmerising to hear; Schweizer sounds like she would never run out of ideas, and is one of those players who provoke whoever's sharing the stage with her to a similar prodigious joy in the unending realms of creative possibility. And it continues for another forty minutes, until Schweizer flings out cluster-splurges to signal the end of the manic dance which Drake's gusto-filled oom-pahs have half-parodically been leading, leaving Anderson's final two honks to bring in the screams. *(David Grundy)*

## **ARCHIE SHEPP – *PHAT JAM IN MILANO***

**Label:** Archie Ball

**Release Date:** April 2009

**Tracklist:** Dig; Ill Biz; Kashmir; The Life we Chose; Revolution; Casket; Ill Biz (Radio Edit)

**Personnel:** Archie Shepp: tenor sax, vocals; Oliver Lake: alto sax; Cochemea Gastelum: tenor sax ; Napoleon Maddox: vocals; Joe Fonda: bass; Hamid Drake: drums

**Additional Information:** Recorded live in concert at Teatro Manzoni, Milano, Italy, on November 19th, 2007.



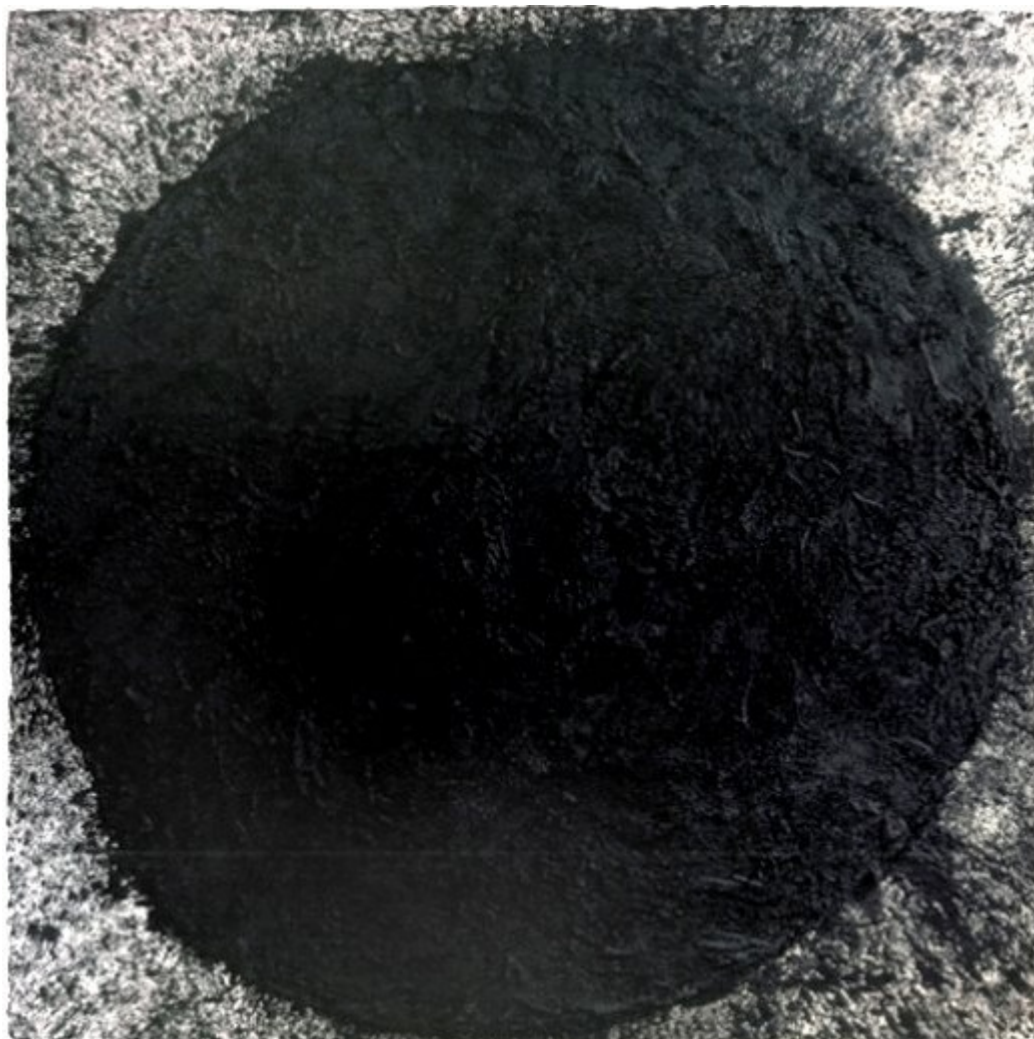
As ever when Shepp releases a new disc these days, one has to ask: what's new about this? Well, on the surface, a few things: Napoleon Maddox, beat-boxer and rapper from group IsWhat? provides rhythmic amplification with his voice and delivers some rap polemix. Oliver Lake's there too, not a bad thing. But listen to 'Phat Jam' and it's clear that Shepp's riding the same crest he's been riding for the past few decades. For instance: has he been performing 'Revolution/Mama Rose' inordinate amounts of times since it first appeared on 1969's 'Poem for Malcolm'? Well...yes. At least he doesn't trot out his other very old warhorse, 'Steam', again, I suppose. The new tracks are pleasant enough - 'Casket' is, as far as I can tell, derived from 'A Night in Tunisia', 'Kashmir' has a certain urgency to it, 'Ill Biz' is a fairly catchy anti-Bush rant by Maddox: decent jazz-rap. But the context in which Shepp places himself allows for absolutely no surprises; his playing, though still peppered with bluesy honks and free-jazz-ish yelps, has none of the edge that it did in the 60s. Whereas recordings like 'Coral Rock' or 'Kwanza' or even 'Attica Blues' worked pretty well as politically-conscious, heavily-R&B-tinged versions of jazz, in which Shepp's rough-edged sax had a forceful impact over surging rhythms and righteous riffs, the space he's in now is an odd sort of compromise between frankly dull traditionalist jazz (by traditionalist, I mean hobbled to clichés, rather than in the fresh and necessary dialogue with traditions which Shepp presumably hopes to be engaging in) and token nods to new styles of African-American music.

Once upon a time Shepp wouldn't have been interested in being bigged up by Napoleon Maddox ('Dig') and would have just launched straight in to blowing the joint off the sucker. Not any more. It's almost as if he needs to be constantly reminded that he's a 'great jazz artist', and that such a reminder leaves him free of the need to take risks, rather than spurring him on to keep it fresh.



So, 'Phat Jam' is totally listenable and probably quite good fun if you've never heard anything else of Shepp's, but, Madox's presence excepted (and, let's be honest, while beat-boxing along to the rhythm section is cool enough, it doesn't exactly offer the possibilities that Beaver Harris did), things ARE what they used to be in the musical world of Archie Shepp, and it's time for a change. The music's not BAD - but, for someone of his stature, that's not enough. *(David Grundy)*

**SUNN O))) – MONOLITHS AND DIMENSIONS**



**Label:** Southern Lord

**Release Date:** May 2009

**Tracklist:** Aghartha; Big Church; Hunting&Gathering (Cydonia); Alice

**Personnel:** Stephen O' Malley: electric guitar; Greg Anderson: bass guitar; Attila Csihar: vocals; Julian Priester, Steve Moore, Stuart Dempster: conch shell, trombone; Dylan Carlson: electric guitar; Oren Ambarchi: electric guitar, electronics, cymbal, gong, wolf log, oscillator; Cuong Vu, Tony Moore: trumpet; Taina Karr: English Horn, oboe; Josiah Boothby: French Horn; Hans Teuber: clarinet, bass clarinet, alto flute; Eric Walton: piano; Rex Ritter: Moog Synthesizer, Korg Synthesizer; Steve Moore: Korg synthesizer, organ; Mell Dettmer: hydrophone, tubular bells; Melissa Walsh: harp; Eyvind Kang, Timb Harris: violin, viola; Keith Lowe, Moriah Neils, Tim Smollen: double bass; William Herzog: electric tamboura; Brad Mowen: bass drum, percussion; Jessika Kenney, Angela Kiemayer, Jutta Sierlinger, Verena Bodem, Katharina Einsiedl, Loma Döring, Stephanie Pfeffer: female choir; William Herzog, Brad Mowen, Daniel Menche, Joe Preston: male choir; Eyvind Kang, Jessika Kenney, Steve Moore, Randall Dunn, Stephen O' Malley: arrangers

Stephen O' Malley and Greg Anderson are known for their wide range of tastes beyond the expected avant-metal, with be-bop and Miles Davis' electric period somewhat surprisingly cited in interviews. And it seems they've made a conscious effort to draw on that latter influence in particular here: 'Aghartha' of course references Davis' seminal 1975 album, while 'Big Church' riffs on 'Little Church', a haunting little whistle and trumpet number with Hermeto Pascoal from 'Live-Evil.' That might be expected, given the similarly dark, dense and electric thickets of sound Miles was creating in the '70s, but, as this record shows, the Krautrock-esque, blissed-out space-jazz sections of 'Agharta' and 'Pangaea' may have been just as important. Especially so given that the final piece is a tribute to the late Alice Coltrane, creator of string-dominated devotionals whose trance-inducing, Indian-influenced ecstasies might at first seem the polar opposite of Sunn's extended emphasis on 'doom' (compare, for instance, the title track of 'Universal Consciousness' to 'Belülről Pusztít' off the live album 'Oracle', where, underneath the monotonous growls of the lead vocalist, what sound like electric drills chatter alongside distant wails, groans, cries, and throat singing, like the sound effects for a particularly grim horror film).

The 'standard' massive, doomy drone barrage that opens the record is as heavy and effective as ever – rather like the Richard Serra piece which fronts the package in stark black-and-white, it plants itself firmly in the foreground and refuses to leave, though made up in its massiveness by minute gradations in texture and shade. However – and this may be where the Davis/Coltrane influence really comes into its own – it's when Sunn branch out into more texturally varied worlds that interesting things really happen (this release sees them working with the largest number of collaborators on any of their records). Part of their strength has been the great variety they find in areas of similar texture and mood – the sustained power chord, black metal's monotone landscape taken to its furthest extreme – yet it seems they're not afraid of venturing out, of opening up their palette. The result is neither merely typical Sunn with added trimmings, nor insanely over-ambitious. As ever, it skirts parody and the ridiculous – but that's an essential part of the Sunn experience, and without it, the impact would be nowhere near as powerful, nowhere near as viscerally arresting and emotionally draining.

On opener 'Aghartha', Attila's vocals are atmospheric as on the LP-only 'Domkirke', where they really took off with the accompaniment of a massive church organ – an ambience part Gothic horror movie, part religious exploration. Here it's a full-blown orchestra, multiple strings screeching and scratching and sliding like the creaking of a ghost ship around the words which he half-spits, half-mutters in his trademark growling bass register. Further 'dimensions' are added by the unearthly sounds of conch shells played by no lesser figures than ambient music pioneer Stuart Dempster and Herbie Hancock's Mwandishi-sideman Julian Priester.

There's something of a shock when 'Big Church' opens with a melodic female choir not that far off John Taverner, and even more when expectations are doubly subverted as Anderson and O'Malley enter with a set of power chords more intense than ever. The combination of throbbing electric guitars and full-blown choir isn't, in fact, as crazy as it sounds; in any case, it's nothing like the gently melancholic, mournfully wistful Miles Davis miniature it half-name-checks, as rumbling whispers, half-Gregorian chant, half speaking-in-tongues, build up until stilled by the tolling of a tubular bell. Somewhere in the mix are Earth frontman Dylan Carlson and avant-jazz trumpeter Cuong Vu; but, whereas Vu's frequent associate Bill Frisell fitted right into the heavy Americana of Earth's latest release, 'Big Church' aims for



grander things, and there's not much space for individual lines to make themselves heard. In the process, it must be admitted, the piece comes close to sounding like overblown and simplistic classical music, but the concept is so strange that it just about comes off, and it's hard not to be carried along with the relentless force of the track's ear-splitting climax.

'Hunting and Gathering (Cydonia)' substitutes the female choir for massed male voices, who replicate Attila's droning growl. Rex Ritter's Moog synth occasionally verges on bad taste but comes into its own as the track ends in desolate, howling feedback.

But it's not until the final piece, 'Alice,' that the album really comes into its own. Starting off more like the aforementioned Earth album – with slowed-down and almost twangy riffs rather than sludgy power chords, each repetition underscored by swelling orchestral washes and ominous masses of screeching strings – the rest of the track then turns into a bizarrely uplifting extended climax as a trio of trombones enter, crawling out melodies at suitably tortuous speeds. What's so impressive is the way the whole thing's sustained – inevitability, and perhaps even predictability, are not problems, but the bedrock of its success; concerns about where things are going are hardly relevant when one's actually listening to the track unfold. One knows exactly where things are going, in a general sense – it's hard not to latch on when things happen so slowly – yet some details (such as the indefinitely-suspended sound of Oren Ambarchi's cymbals) completely escape attention until when realizes they've been there for minutes, and it's the unexpected moments which have the greatest impact: most notably, the lovely way the track concludes, Alice Coltrane-style harp arpeggios causing everything to melt away except Priester's trombone, playing out a simple last phrase which, in context, attains an almost unbearable poignancy.

It's hard to say at exactly which point full ecstasy is reached, or even to chart the stages, so skillfully does the whole thing sweep one up in its wake. The conclusion must be that it's the overall momentum, the way things build and build – much as one can pinpoint moments such as the first appearance of the oboe's counter-melody 11 minutes in, the entirety of Julian Priester's five-minute solo, those final swells and ebbs – they would not be the same without their cumulative and reciprocal impact. All this demonstrates a masterly handling of form which, while it appears to be working on a fairly simple level, at a fairly low peak of information density, in fact requires enormous skill to pull off. However you choose to label them – composers, sound artists, improvisers, or elements of all three – Sunn continue pursue total, mind-and-body-encompassing musical experiences, and 'Alice' may be their finest yet.

*(David Grundy)*

## **AKI TAKASE & RUDI MAHALL – *EVERGREEN***



**Label:** Intakt

**Release Date:** 2008

**Tracklist:** Mood Indigo; I'll Remember April; Bel Ami; Tea for Two; Moonglow; You and the Night and the Music; How Long has This Been Going On?; Cleopatra's Dream; Beginnng to See the Light; Two Sleepy People; Good Bait; You Took Advantage of Me; It's Only a Paper Moon; Lulu's Back in Town

**Personnel:** Aki Takase: piano; Rudi Mahall: bass clarinet

'What can I but enumerate old themes?' asked W.B. Yeats in his poem about writer's block, *Circus animals' desertion*. But if you imagine that a selection of show tunes, Ellingtonia and bebop numbers (by Tadd Dameron and Bud Powell) involves the kind of looped tape of the 'tradition' as practised by neo-cons, nothing could be less true.

The Art ensemble of Chicago's famous blend/clash of satire and reverence for the past is more like it, but Takase and Mahall go beyond this. The attitude is there in Ganelin's headlong, anarchic take on *Summertime* and *Mack the Knife*, some of Braxton's marches and other excursions into time signature once considered 'corny', maybe some of the musical cartoons of Willem Breuker and Han Bennink; farther in the past another precedent for the highly expressive vocalized exchanges of this duo is the replication of the sounds of spoken human dialogue on Mingus and Dolphy's *What love*.

For all that, these two as a duo (but also in their other projects) have developed an immediately identifiable sound. The unreserved immersion in left-hand stride patterns on piano, often subverted into wild dissonances, Mahall's unparalleled attack on bass clarinet with its dynamic extremes, sparing use of extended techniques, let loose when they do occur with the impact of an explosion- can this kind of playing actually be applied to, say, *I'll remember April*? Hard to believe, till you've heard it; yet, standards like *April* or *How high the moon* (not included here) in their original sung form were appreciably slower than the tempos used by jazz musicians as a matter of course.

The reply to the Yeats quote at the beginning comes of course from his contemporary Ezra Pound who said 'make it new' in relation to translating poetry, but the relevance here should be clear. The songs are not so much reharmonized in their theme statements as given a new life in the improvisations, which harmonically may seem to be at so many removes from the original changes as to be on another planet. But Takase and Mahall obviously subscribe to the view expressed by Dolphy, Ornette and Booker Little among others that there's no such thing as a wrong note.

What may put some listeners off is the relentless expressiveness. Intense is not the word; whatever is the opposite of expressionless, this is it. The CD blurb calls Mahall the world's best bass clarinetist, whatever that means, but there can be little debate that since Dolphy, and unlike most of the saxophonists who double or dabble on this instrument, you can hear him and say not just 'that's a bass clarinet' but 'that's Rudi Mahall.'

Track 9 begins with an outburst of atonal piano, gradually joined by bass clarinet, and after about a minute the strains of the Ellington song become recognizable- 'I never cared much for moonlit skies, I never wink back at fireflies...' Before the reprise of the theme the *meanest* sustained reed multiphonics of the whole set precede a headlong section of at least double the speed of the theme. *Two sleepy people* is played as straight as any number here, apart from some clarinet ululations and some pretty oblique harmonies from the piano. If you were to walk into a music space and be confronted with extreme *skronk*, glottal, guttural, fricative, plosive, with key and time signature left in suspense and then recognize the sound of *Lulu's back in town*, this is the kind of impact the final track has.

In this age of all-too-mechanical reproduction the neo-cons' replication of great music, ancient to c.1960s has a marked resemblance to those pop singers on *Top of the Pops* who mimed to their own records; whereas this CD resonates and vibrates with all manner of echoes from the past, allusions and counter references, holding out

some real hope for tradition in and around jazz as a basis for creative music in the future.

For those readers lucky enough to hear these two in 2006 either in Appleby or London (or elsewhere) this will, I hope make sense. For others who might be interested in their approach to music, but have an aversion to standards (not that this is 'repertory' music), I've added details of a few other albums which shouldn't be too hard to find.

### RECOMMENDED

- **Takase and Mahall - *The dessert* (Leo).** Original themes with improvisations.
- **Rudi Mahall Quartett** (Self-titled on Jazzwerkstatt Llabel). With Takase, Johannes Bauer, Tony Buck. Improvisations.
- **Takase- *St.Louis Blues* (Enja).** With Mahall, Fred Frith, Nils Wogram and Paul Lovens. Mostly re(de-)constructions of W.C.Handy numbers.
- **Aki and the 'Good boys' - *Procreation* (Enja).** With Mahall, Walter Gauchel, Johannes Fink and Heinrich Köbberling. Original themes with improvisation, a small amount of verbal input.
- **Takase and Silke Eberhard- *Ornette Coleman anthology* (Intakt 2 CDs)** Reinterpretations of OC tunes for piano/reeds duo.
- **Takase and Mahall- *Free zone Appleby 2006* (psi).** A series of improvisations in permuted ensembles with Paul Lovens, Evan Parker, Paul Rutherford, Alexander von Schlippenbach and Phil Wachsmann.

*(Sandy Kindness)*

### VARIOUS – SPECTRA: *GUITAR IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY*



**Label:** Quiet Design

**Release Date:** 2009

**Tracklist:** Three Small Pieces [Tetuzi Akiyama]; SIX [Sebastien Roux + Kim Myhr]; Nylah [Mike Vernusky]; Music for Microtonal Guitars and Mallets – Edit [Duane Pitre]; Fermion [Cory Allen]; The End of the World [Erdem Helvacioğlu]; Fragment from a Response to Cardew's Treatise [Keith Rowe]; The World Stops [Jandek]

**Personnel:** Tetuzi Akiyama, Sebastien Roux, Kim Myhr, Mike Vernusky, Duane Pitre, Cory Allen, Erdem Helvacioğlu, Keith Rowe, Jandek: guitar

The 'Three Small Pieces' by Tetuzi Akiyama occupy the same sort of territory as Taku Sugimoto's work, at the stage before he turned even more drastically to minimalism and the extreme spacing-out of musical events. In such a context, each event, each gesture, becomes enormously weighted, though at the same time this leads to a slight sameness of atmosphere which allows things quite easily to slip into background listening. Maybe, in a way, that's the point – while at some moments the intensity of focus demanded may raise one's consciousness in a way that is quite non-spiritual: a heightening of sense, of perception, of attention to detail (I'm sure one could claim that it was spiritual if one was that way inclined, and these may indeed be

aspects of some so-called 'spiritual' experience) – at others it forms something much more subliminal, much more integrated into one's whole environment and awareness, in time with a rhythm of *being*. The two are closer than one might think – partly because it's easy, when one reaches a certain level of focus, to slip out of that focus into a kind of half-aware, dream-like state, perhaps because of the difficulty of maintaining the initial state for a sustained period of time. I may have demonstrated an unwillingness to pin things down with 'spiritual tags', but it's hard not to make philosophical connections with – for example – meditation practices, and I don't feel that's too ideologically weighted a claim to make.

The piece by Sebastien Roux and Kim Myhr again has a particular non-western quality to it, the timbres created a little reminiscent of a gamelan ensemble. Again, there's quite an intense focus on small events, though in this case these are reversed and looped in a way that's more circular, less linear than Akiyama's approach. Much as I'd hate to reduce it to background music for a movie in the head, I can't help being reminded of one of those modern short films, not so much unfolding as just hovering there in extreme close-up: shots of barely-disturbed liquid, occasional ripples in lazy outflow.

Mike Vernusky's piece again has certain affinities with certain films and certain types of film music: the faintly-troubled drone, humming, building, gliding, faintly booming, comes across almost as the ambient sound-effects accompanying an uncertainly eerie scene, though to these it does manage to keep itself clear of becoming mere atmospherics.

Duane Pitre, a former skater turned guitarist and composer, creates music more in common with classic early minimalism: hushed drones and static microtonal not-quite melodies, zinging bowed tones leading to growing chorused abrasiveness simultaneous with a trembling rise in volume, with more microtonal strums to end.

Label founder Cory Allen builds 'Fermion' on metallic loops, over which what sounds like a distant choir rises and falls over. Water washes swell and fade, crackles move up and out. Erdem Helvacioğlu comes across as a little more placid, his 'End of the World' being rather too new-agey for my liking. Drones, tinkles, and delay-pedal guitar strums play around for what seems like rather too long, though an increase in volume and a folky tinge to the guitar playing do vary things later on.

If things risked sinking into the rather inconsequential there, Keith Rowe doing Cardew's *Treatise* firmly restores the balance in favour of the decidedly non-pretty. In fact, Rowe seems to be the odd one out on the disc as a whole – while he's undoubtedly influenced a lot of the other players, a lot of whom are doing the same sort of things as him – using drones, loops and metallic sonorities – the textures he produces tend to sound more harsh, and, perhaps more importantly, the music he creates is packed much more full with event and sonic variety, is much more unpredictable in the way it unfolds.

And then Jandek caps things off – harsh in a completely different way to Rowe, and with completely different effect. There's not a drone in sight here; rather, we have a guitar and a harmonica freed from its role syruping cowboy campfires or punctuating the verses with melodic refrains in Bob Dylan songs, smearing instead wild desolate loneliness and uncertainty.

As a whole, 'Spectra' covers a territory where improv crosses to composition and composition to ambient and ambient to sound art. One is slightly wary of the kind of art gallery aesthetic that settles over the whole thing – it's easy to imagine this disc playing beside some frigid white piece of closed-off eye-candy for the 'sophisticated' arty wing of today's rich. But then again, maybe it's some howl in the science-fiction

night, technology's quiet scream, its metallic sheen in which we see our own mesmerised faces. So to listen to this disc is to lose oneself in its not-really comforting maze. (*David Grundy*)

**WEASEL WALTER/ HENRY KAISER/ DAMON SMITH – PLANE CRASH**



**Label:** ug explode

**Release Date:** 2009

**Tracklist:** The End; Becalmed; Untamed Talents; Justice and Good Order; The Guessing Game; In the Field; An Exchange of Prisoners; Palaces; The God of Blue; Second Stories; Home; Sad Experience Teaches Us; The Wedding; The End and Afterward

**Personnel:** Henry Kaiser: acoustic and electric guitars; Damon Smith: bass; Weasel Walter: drums

Playing with Weasel Walter, Kaiser has to raise his game (by which I mean play harder faster and noisier) because Walter is almost always full trip pounding with his drum-sticks. This is not the kind of free-jazz drumming you get in the cymbal washes of Rashied Ali; rather, Walter's cymbal-work comes out more as ringing ticking splashes than watery rolling flow, like the jet-stream of the crashing plane. And Damon Smith's bass playing, once you stop to think about it, demonstrates phenomenal energy levels to keep up with it all. Yet despite the title and the jokey play in the liner notes, which make out that the musicians died after the recording (as if the studio energy killed them – the engineer 'at the controls' of the juggernaut-aircraft that was this recording session), this isn't as full-bore as Walter's 'Firestorm' (a large-group live album featuring Marshall Allen) or his new large ensemble album ('Mysteries Beneath the Planet'). OK, most people will probably be listening out for the electric noise-spasms – which aren't, however, Thurston Moore texture-clouds, but three independent instrumental lines all playing full-bore at once – i.e. more texturally complex, maybe more in the tradition of European free improv, but with the power quotient kicked up by Walter's furious thrashing. But these noisier pieces only take up just over half the disc, which leaves quite a few acoustic pieces which the liner notes compare to the SME and which do certainly demonstrate a different side to the band.

'The End' finds Walter playing a beat which gives a military tattoo edge to things, and Smith playing figures which are almost riffs underneath Kaiser who is just nasty, his low buzzing frenzy constantly switching into feedback'd shriek. 'Becalmed' is a different beast, quick short suppressed cymbal bursts, high eerie strangled tweeting birds, low metallic guitar. Though Walter's machinations ensure that this is still full of incident, it's probably the least busy of the acoustic tracks on the record, concentrating on Smith charting out his high song-lines and Kaiser complementing that with his hollow sound-rings.

It's not necessarily always the case that the electric tracks are loud and pounding in contrast to quiet acoustic tracks, though: 'Palaces' (acoustic) is still knotty and dense, though Walter has to tone down his playing to accommodate the reduced volume of the acoustic guitar. Back to electricity, 'The God of Blue' is dominated by Kaiser's use of some sort of feed-back effect which has similarities in timbre to the computer/math-rock elements of later Luttenbachers (let's say, 'Destructo Noise Explosion').

'Second Stories' places us in familiar Walter noise-land once more with what sounds like someone screaming, bass and heavily-distorted guitar sliding around all over the place like kids frantically back-peddalling arms wildly waving in the air as they try to control themselves on the oil-slicked slope.

As we head for 'Home' things don't seem likely to resolve themselves into whatever you were expecting: Walter is scratching, clicking, making Kaiser's melodic trail sound elegantly worried; Kaiser, who is both rubbing off on that frantic business and at the same time standing in contrast to it, a relatively unflustered kind of picking.

The final few tracks now, and some new emotional territory is reached or at least reached out to: take Smith's arco playing on 'Sad Experience Teaches Us', melody trying to poke its head through the strangling electric thicket, and the even more explicitly mournful edge to 'The Wedding'. But 'The End and Afterward' is just (im)pure filth guitar, rolls to a growl and thump and ends there. (*David Grundy*)

## **TREVOR WATTS/ JAMIE HARRIS - *LIVE IN SAO PAULO, BRASIL***

**Label:** Hi4Head Records

**Release Date:** 2006

**Tracklist:** Multiki; Tribal; Eastern Eyes; Sopata; Anna B; Three Part Invention; Ancestry

**Personnel:** Trevor Watts: saxophones & percussion; Jamie Harris: percussion & voice

**Additional Information:** Recorded July 27<sup>th</sup> 2005 at Teatro Popular Do Sesi, Sao Paulo.

Given the primarily rhythmic thrust of the music, freer playing is left to one side for this date: although on occasion Watts breaks into the sort of sounds associated with free improvisation and/or free jazz, this is more as a particular technique, deployed for a particular purpose within the context of the song, than as 'free' invention. (It's more like the rougher, non-standard sounds you might hear at the emotional climax of a jazz song.) That said, his playing is free and flowing, melodically inventive and delightfully joining with Harris' rhythmic pulses, varying speeds while engaging in the same melody, working round refrains (as vocalised by Harris on the final track), repeating phrases until new material shows through the cracks, returning to melodies, relishing them.

When I think about it those are all traits of 'folk musics' or 'world musics' (the latter a term which basically just means the combination of the folk musics of the world, I would have thought). Of course, Watts and Harris are coming through the jazz tradition (which is itself another folk-music), but with a freedom to move away



from jazz, which the stripped-down setting allows more than if this had been a duet with a standard jazz instrument – even a drum-set. Thus, Watts’ middle-eastern tones come across not as exotic colouring within a fixed jazz context (as they tended to even in the work of Yusef Lateef), but as genuine moves into different types of music, as part of a discourse not limited by generic imperatives, but allowed to roam by its rhythmic restrictions: a freedom to travel across the similar points in different terrain, to exploit the tightenings and loosening of the pulse, dancing across sounds and countries at will, but with respect. (*David Grundy*)

### **TREVOR WATTS/ PETER KNIGHT – *REUNION: LIVE IN LONDON***

**Label:** Hi4Head Records

**Release Date:** 2007

**Tracklist:** Reunion, I-IV

**Personnel:** Trevor Watts: alto & soprano saxes; Peter Knight: violin

These two musicians worked together from 1983 onwards, and then, after a period spend apart, decided to do a Reunion at the Queen’s Arms in Islington, in 1999. Interestingly, not only did they decide the music would come out best without any practice, they also decided the music would come out best without even any discussion about what they were going to play. Bold. And it worked. I would say. The result is a CD of one track, lasting fifty-minute, the last fifty-three or so of which are devoid of almost any crowd banter.

There is a pervading sense of peace and meditation in this music. Even in sections of atonal multiphonics from the soprano or scratchy ‘sul ponte’ bowing from the violin. Granted, at the times when they are using Eastern modes or even more simply banging up and down the pentatonic scale, it is easy to do this, but as I say, the variety of music included here makes the ubiquity of this sense an achievement. They are truly natural at passing over the focus of attention, even if it is not in order to actually play anything approaching a melody, something in the tone of each player sort of ‘wakes up’ as the other hands over.

At times it does admittedly become essentially a jam for Trevor Watts over Peter Knight’s strumming of one chord, and in fact, I would say that there is more Watts soloing than Knight soloing, but that is probably inevitable given the violin can function as a harmony instrument in a far more malleable way than the saxophone. (Watts himself eschews the traditional conception of ‘soloist’, preferring to think of all the playing he does as part of the collective sound.)

Watts is unusual in that as well as having taken in a lot of the techniques of post-Evan Parker free playing on the sax, he is also up for playing over just one mode for several minutes, with attention only on melody, tone-quality and articulation. Slap-tonguing, flutter-tonguing and multiphonics feature in his vocabulary, along with the kind of running around that comes straight from Ornette Coleman.

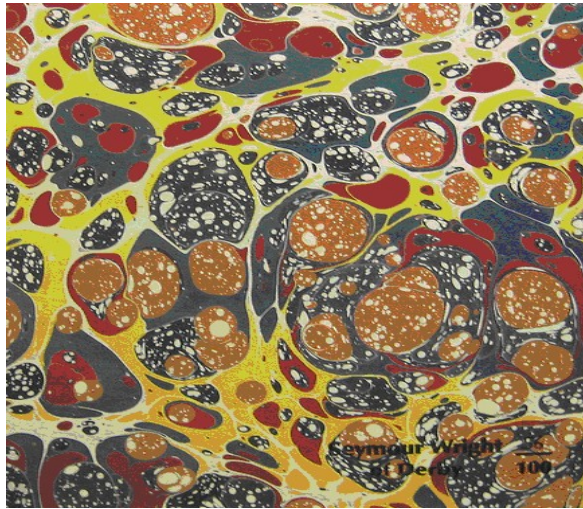
Knight takes a solo more like a melancholy cadenza from a Romantic Violin Concerto around the twenty minute mark, with Watts now in full French-mode alto playing, mostly juxtaposing material with Knight, but occasionally unable to reply in kind to certain motifs or sounds.

With such space, their minute intervals and long notes, creeping into microtones invoke Xenakis or Ligeti, especially because of the lack of rhythm section – at times if it were transcribed it would not be out of place at a contemporary classical concert.

Relatively little time is given over to solo performance, but given the space with which each can accompany, this is hardly missed.

I suppose some people will find the focus on modal and scalar playing limited, and others will observe the lack of jazz language in the phraseology. However, this, for me, makes the music all the more fresh and certainly a lot of this is down to the folk inflections and roots of Knight's playing and Watts' awareness of the musical situation in that respect. (*Oscar Lomas*)

### SEYMOUR WRIGHT – *SEYMOUR WRIGHT OF DERBY*



**Label:** Self-released

**Release Date:** 2008

**Tracklist:** In the Wright place at the Wright time (three years earlier); REED 'N' WRIGHT!; The Wright balance; Wright-O!

**Personnel:** Seymour Wright: alto saxophone

**Additional Information:** Track 1 recorded by John Lely, Davener's, New Cross, 2005; Track 2 recorded by Tom Wallace, Barefoot Studios, Brixton; Tracks 3 & 4 recorded by Sebastien Lexier, Goldsmith's College, New Cross, 2007 & 2008.

Despite the intentional and affectionate archaisms in packaging and presentation – the record's named after Wright's fellow townsman, the painter Joseph Wright of Derby, and the track titles are reminiscent of the sort of cringe-worthy puns that cropped up on all sorts of 1960s Blue Note Records – this music is at the cutting edge of saxophone playing. Yet of course that edge exists in relation with what came before it, and what might have come before it: in a brief note, Wright describes the music on this record as “improvised and about the saxophone – music, history and technique – actual and potential”, suggesting that choosing certain possibilities need not mean the automatic dissolution or disruption of other choices, other possibilities. Thus, he works to incorporate advances made by his fellow musicians as inspiration for his investigations of what is often uncharted territory, claiming in an interview that he feels it's a 'moral duty' to match the sort of advances made by the likes of John Tilbury and Sebastien Lexier in what can be done with a piano, on a commonly-played instrument, full of timbral possibilities which are only just beginning to be explored.

The result sounds nothing like most saxophone playing emerging from the jazz tradition, nor even much like that of free improvisation, which still tends to share a lot of its timbral qualities with at least the outer limits of jazz: I'm thinking Mats Gustaffson, Evan Parker, John Butcher, the latter of whom probably comes nearest to Wright in his ability to transform his instrument into something which sounds utterly unlike itself (or how it's supposed to sound), yet a vocabulary created with painstaking care, attention to detail, and strong musical logic. Wright's aesthetic is more obviously 'reductionist' than Butcher's, and that's particularly noticeable on this series of solo recordings, which one might describe as a mini-compilation of where Wright's technical and mental experiments have taken him thus far. Butcher has been working a lot with feedback and with amplified and natural resonances of late, his

sounds tending to be sustained, to hang in the air, in no way lacking a real bite and hard edge, but with a kind of spaciousness that's created primarily from sound, rather than silence. With Wright, however, one feels that it's almost the other way round: the sounds fit in around the silences, or, if not the silences, the 'ambient' noises present in the rooms where the recordings are made.

That's the impression, though in fact, most of the sounds heard here are produced by Wright; the one uncontrolled sound I can think of is a distant police siren on the third track, and, for the most part, what might at first sound an unintended sonic occurrence, out of the performer's reach, turns out to be a deliberately employed musical element which gives rise to a whole new structural and textural direction in the piece. Most notable in this regard is a moment from the same track, where what sounds like a creaking door (whether this is an actual door or a sound sample is unclear) extends its creak a long way beyond the normal length of a door-opening to underpin a fresh burst of activity. In context, it sounds extremely noisy, so deliberately paced is this music, although, truth be told, it requires a high-volume and sensitive headphones to pick out the full nuances.

The shorter tracks which open the album are both more fleeting and more hesitant than the much more lengthy second-half, Wright's manipulation of the saxophone keys providing a cautiously rhythmic element which never quite settles on the straightforward time-keeping it suggests, his hisses and bursts of breath sharing the space with static and muffled voices from a radio which seems to be triggered in some way by the reed instrument. It's not always easy to pick out what's making which sound, though it seems that most of what you hear actually does come just from Wright's alto saxophone, which makes this a real feat of musical inventiveness and resourcefulness, and something of a showcase, as well as an utterly absorbing listen in its own right.

This, then, deserves all the plaudits it's been getting among the online improv community, and, what's more, it can be downloaded for free. Even if there's a danger of fetishising this one release, of building up over-inflated expectations about what it can do for the development of the music and the saxophone (when in fact it's Wright's continuing live work, solo and in groups, where the development is actively happening), it seems to me that is a very significant recording. (*David Grundy*)

### **C. SPENCER YEH – *THE STRANGLER***

**Label:** Chocolate Monk

**Release Date:** 2009

**Tracklist:** Escape Artist; Comedy FX; The Stranger

**Personnel:** C. Spencer Yeh: voice, samples

**Additional Information:** Artwork by 'Wyvern'.

The title of the third piece and of the album as a whole play on the difference between 'strangler' and 'stranger': the stranger making these strange sounds could be more than just the outsider (artist); he could be strangling your throat with his sounds, the villain on the edge, sound murderer who lives below you and spends his life working how best to lay waste to the world of sounds you are so comfortable in/with. In truth this is wacko: comedy FX at first makes you chuckle for two reasons – the 'inherent' funniness of the sounds themselves (or so we have been trained to associate them, whether they are 'inherently' funny is of course another matter); and the knowing way in which Yeh is making music out of them. One can imagine him searching through old cartoons and TV shows looking for the FX and laugh tracks and

in his glee splicing them into a piece of his own. Then it actually turns pretty fucking sinister, the clown's face is sad because something is desperately wrong and the only way he can tell you about it is by enacting the opposite of what he feels, painted happy. This track is about surfaces, it is nothing more than surface in a sense; it is not 'deep' or 'spiritual'. Is it enough that it knows this, and that self-criticism is built in as a mode of criticising a whole lot more? Emptiness and shallowness of TV laughter, cultural construction of humour, appropriate and inappropriate sounds, etc. Let's admit that track one is, OK, simply a ticking metronome/ squelchy handclap for 13 minutes, occasionally grinding out to silence or being swamped in static only to start up again with renewed lifeless vigour. Conceptually I'll accept that, but to actually listen all the way through? The growled and slobbering voices of the 'stranger' on the third track might come up with the answer: delirious and delighted and yet somehow horrified at having put as through that and at the fact that we have listened, all the way through, waiting for the punchline – the effect is near-nihilistic. If it was a joke, our laughter soon froze but the mirthless smile was too stuck to turn to tears. It's all quite deadening, and maybe that's the 'point'; but I'm not sure I want to take this particular lesson again, to find out how deadened I am by being deadened through music.

*(David Grundy)*

### **AMI YOSHIDA/ TOSHIMARU NAKAMURA – *SOBA TO BARA***

**Label:** Erstwhile

**Release Date:** April 2009

**Personnel:** Ami Yoshida: voice; Toshimaru Nakamura: no-input mixing board

**Additional Information:** Recorded separately by Yoshida and Nakamura in June 2008.

If music is being made by a human, how can it ever be 'inhuman'? I think it's a fair point, and that the presence of a voice should somehow add 'humanity' to proceedings, should 'humanise' the 'cold surfaces' of this kind of improvised electronic music, is dispelled by the way in which Nakamura's fuzzes and clicks interact with the curiously repetitive nature of Yoshida's voice, focussing on similar notes and overtones, nightmare scream-repetition (in a controlled way – this isn't in-your-face scream-therapy). The record is quiet and there are silences, but it feels claustrophobic too (if I'm permitted to apply the spatial metaphor to sound), closing in; if a silence exists for longer than to create utmost tension it is quickly broken, most often by Yoshida. Maybe Nakamura's sounds become a new kind of silence, an underpinning that does not so much accompany (for lead voice is not the issue here) but insinuates its way in to become fragile bedrock – bedrock maybe for the listener's own thoughts or their physical reactions to the sound, who knows.

And that question of tension – can the music be said to be tense (it is tense, sure) when it brings to bear that certain flattened repetitive quality? That may not be so much a result of actually repetition, minimalism-style; rather, the use of materials and palette is notably (and deliberately) restricted to a small range of gestures reconfigured and re-examined in multiple relations. So that feeling comes across as something of a quality of the types of sound produced and the types of 'atmosphere' explored, much as one might want to pin these down to some concrete source: e.g. the restriction of gesture or the adoption of certain combinations of timbre – grating yet pure multi-layered vocals with impure (frequency-mixed) electronics wherein the appearance of a pure sine-tone (more occasional than one might expect given our expectations of Nakamura) serves at once to bring out the 'pure' side of the music and to emphasise its 'impurity'.

Is 'emotion' the question here? Well, the music makes me feel certain things, maybe the result of my particular mood when I put it on, but it's not so much that it can inscribe whatever you bring to it, that it's some kind of emptied surface for you to fill – yet nor is it the case that the primary aim is to 'communicate emotion'. Hell, the music might just be made without thinking about 'listeners' at all, just existing for itself and for those who make it, whose activity it encapsulates yet lives beyond.

*(David Grundy)*

## RE-ISSUES/ HISTORICAL

### GATO BARBIERI – *IN SEARCH OF THE MYSTERY*

**Label:** ESP - Disk

**Release date:** 2009

**Tracklist:** In Search of the Mystery/ Michelle; Obsession No.2/ Cinemateque

**Personnel:** Gato Barbieri: tenor saxophone; Calo Scott: cello; Sirone: bass; Bobby Kapp :drums

**Additional information:** Originally released in 1967.

Gato Barbieri's career has traced a strange trajectory, from work on some of the most extreme free jazz of the late 60s, to a soupy pop/jazz hybrid whose only connection with the earlier recordings was Barbieri's still-distinctive tenor sax tone. As critic Richard S. Ginell puts it, "regardless of the idiom in which he works, the warm-blooded Barbieri has always been one of the most overtly emotional tenor sax soloists on record, occasionally driving the voltage even higher with impulsive vocal cheerleading."

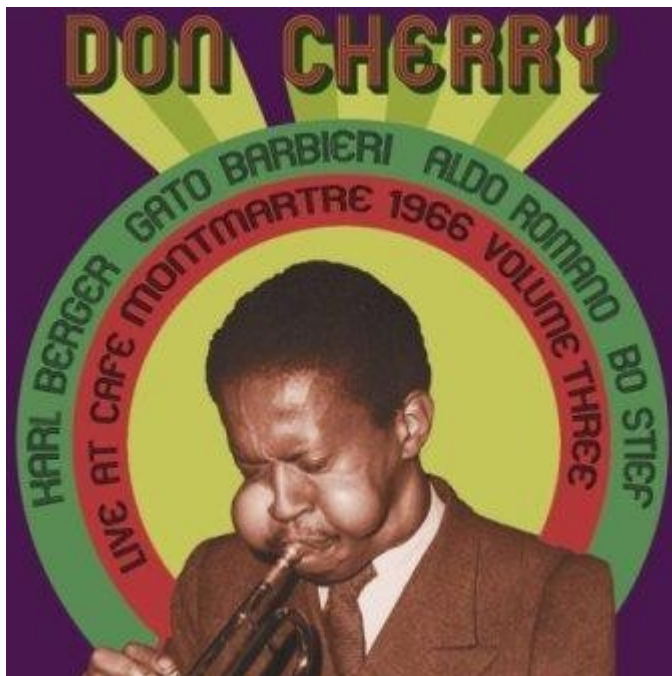
Beginning his musical career in the big band of Argentina's other main jazzman, Lalo Schiffrin, he was introduced to the free jazz scene when he moved to Europe in 1962, joining Don Cherry's group (see review below). His earlier playing was influenced by John Coltrane, as most of the avant-garde saxophonists were, but it actually sounds closer to the extremely rough, vocalised tone of Pharoah Sanders and Albert Ayler, going straight for the ecstatic jugular with no pussyfooting. It was perhaps a more limited sound than Coltrane's (or Sanders' or Ayler's, for that matter), but it had tremendous visceral effect, creating excitement and burning with passion whether in a free jazz or straighter context. He once said: "When I play the saxophone, I play life, I play love, I play anger, I play confusion. I play when people scream."

Like many free jazz musicians at this period in the late 60s, Barbieri was recorded by ESP Disk, cutting this, one of the most avant-garde album recorded under his leadership (though it's actually somewhat quieter than his appearance as one of the featured soloists on 'Communications' by the Jazz Composers' Orchestra, where he really pushes the boat out). The title track finds Gato worrying away at single phrases, the stripped-back rhythm section with the unusual (for jazz) cello timbre giving the music a sense of real urgency and strangeness. Even at this stage, Barbieri's playing seems to be coming from a very different angle to that of the other free jazz musicians with whom he was collaborating, and with whom he was being compared at the time. Many of his notes, however shrieking and shocking in sound quality, seem to come from fairly basic variations on the same initial motif, peppering his solos, giving them circular, non-developmental aspects, which builds up an intense, almost claustrophobic power.

Cellist Calo Scott also appeared on albums around this time with Archie Shepp ('Things Have Got to Change' and 'Attica Blues', from 1971 and 72 respectively), Thelonious Monk sideman Charlie Rouse ('Two is One', from 1974), and Carla Bley (he was one of the many musicians, Barbieri included, who appeared on 'Escalator Over the Hill'). His playing here has a woozy, swooning quality to it – that doesn't mean that it's overly soupy, but the tendency for dissonances to emerge from the gradual ratcheting up of originally lyrical lines perfectly complements Barbieri's style, and contributes to the somewhat melancholic feel of the date which marks it out structurally, as well as emotionally, from a lot of the other free jazz of the time. Listen, for instance, to the way the music stills to almost nothing around 14 minutes into the first piece on the album – listen too, to the way it's a *drum solo* which marks the quietest point, Bobby Kapp demonstrating laudable restraint in not taking the opportunity to provide a loud, crash-and-bash showcase.

While this may, then, be neither the most joyous nor the most ferocious Barbieri recording available (one might almost see it as something of an anomaly in his career), it does have a very distinctive atmosphere to it which marks it out as well worth a listen. The re-issue is sparsely packaged, with no liner notes or new photographs: all you get is the music and the recording details, and in a way that's appropriate – it often feels that Gato simply stands up and plays what he feels it necessary to play, under the compulsion of the moment, and to try and box this in with extra facts and figures would not get at that essence. It's all there, laid bare in the music, and, despite the title, it's no mystery: all that's required is that you listen.  
(David Grundy)

### **DON CHERRY – *LIVE AT CAFÉ MONTMARTRE 1966, VOL. 3***



**Label:** ESP - Disk

**Release date:** 2009

**Tracklist:** Complete Communion; Remembrance

**Personnel:** Don Cherry: trumpet & pocket trumpet; Leandro 'Gato' Barbieri: tenor saxophone; Karl Berger: vibes; Bo Stief: bass; Aldo Romano: drums

**Additional information:** Broadcast from the Cafe Montmartre, Copenhagen March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1966.



The great Don Cherry was in at the ‘invention’ of World Music; not as part of a conscious movement, rather as a player willing to collaborate selflessly with players from differing genres and cultures, which he did up to his death in 1995. He played in jazz, folk, and rock contexts and also embraced unusual instruments (doussn’gouni / pocket trumpet) and often sparse instrumentation to convey his music.

This CD comes, of course, from what could loosely be described as the jazz phase which started his recording career. After important recordings with Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Albert Ayler and George Russell, Cherry recorded his first album as a leader under his own name, the brilliant and groundbreaking *Complete Communion* for Blue Note in December 1965. The two long pieces on that album were recorded as suites of themes drawing on the input of bandmates as equal partners to ensure the lyrical flow of the music and to emphasise the subtle dynamics.

The CD in question was recorded live and is similarly structured. It is thrilling to hear how Cherry’s music can flow with the input of colleagues from a different continent – only the tenor player Barbieri was present on the *Complete Communion* recording a matter of a mere two months earlier.

The first track, *Complete Communion*, is a looser version of the piece which opened the album of the same name, but including a reading of Antonio Carlos Jobim’s *Insensatez* (for a different take on the same piece, by the way, check out the version on Robert Wyatt’s *Cuckooland* from 2003 – a good tune travels effortlessly down the years and across genres!). Cherry and Barbieri are lyrical, subtle and quiet/loud as required by the music and Karl Berger’s vibes rise ghostlike for solos when called for – shimmering like Bobby Hutcherson on Eric Dolphy’s *Out to Lunch* album. There are differing time signatures and dynamics and the drumming of Aldo Romano intuitively follows and pushes the band. Bo Stief, the Danish bassist anchors the music and it is instructive and no small compliment to him, that Cherry’s music can be interpreted by a European band (in addition to Stief, Romano is Italian and Berger German)

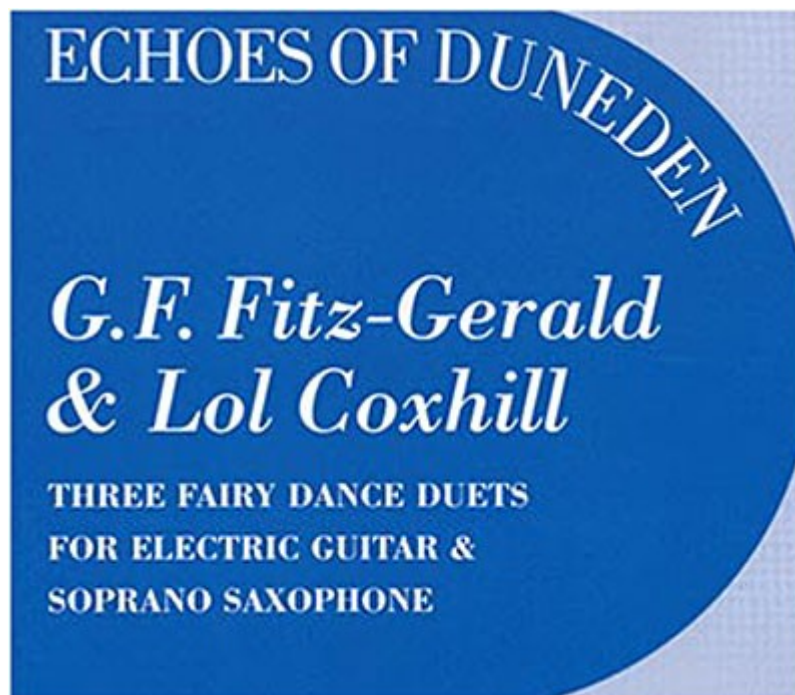
The second track, *Remembrance*, is named after a similarly titled section of the original *Complete Communion* suite and develops the mood of that piece and also, maybe surprisingly, includes Ray Brown’s *Two Bass Hit*. Everything is treated as a musical ‘whole’ and *Two Bass Hit* is openly absorbed into the playing with respect for an older form of the music as it is taken forward.

Ultimately, it is absolutely fascinating to hear this music played live as suites of interconnected pieces, which was very different from the prevailing mood of most live performances in 1966, when clearly defined ‘songs’ were the usual order of things. This ESP – Disk is a window onto Cherry’s live performances in Europe, a context and openness which was embraced by an audience who were appreciative of what innovating musicians such as Cherry were trying to do at that time.

Don Cherry was a true innovator and his recordings from this period are rewarding listens for anyone interested in the genesis of the New Jazz or indeed World Music. His *Complete Communion* and *Symphony for Improvisers* are essential and this CD gives an excellent picture of these musical structures in a live context.

**(Nick Dart)**

**G.F. FITZ-GERALD & LOL COXHILL – *ECHOES OF DUNEDEN***



**Label:** Reel Recordings

**Release date:** 2008

**Tracklist:** Three Fairy Dances: Fairy Dance; Echoes of Duneden; Elfin Tree

**Personnel:** G.F. Fitz-Gerald: electric guitar; Lol Coxhill: soprano saxophone

**Additional information:** Recorded at Roxborough Place Hall, Edinburgh, September 1975

This duo appeared on a side long track on one of Coxhill's early / mid 1970s for Virgin's Caroline label, *Fleas in Custard*. The track, cunningly entitled *Duet for Soprano Saxophone and Guitar* and introduced the then comparatively unknown Fitz-gerald to a wider audience, though he had recorded the obscure *Mouseproof* album (now available on CD) in 1971. With the benefit of hindsight it is possible to look upon Fitz-Gerald as the forgotten man of improvised guitar. His playing does not recognisedly come from a rock or jazz background and his metallic tone and ability to hang shimmering electronic backgrounds behind Coxhill's serpentine soprano pre-dates any number of post-punk and post-rock and industrial guitarists. One could imagine the likes of Thurston Moore and Lee Ronaldo listening intently and basing their own playing templates around Fitzgerald. Fitz-Gerald also appeared solo on the Caroline album *Guitar Solos 2* in 1976, alongside contributions from Fred Frith, Hans Reichel and Derek Bailey. His recorded legacy is small so this release from Reel is a very welcome addition.

Lol Coxhill's recorded output, and indeed profile, are much greater and his playing doesn't disappoint here. The three pieces on the CD sound by turns improvised and written. This live recording may be part of a run of performances at the Edinburgh Festival, giving the duo time to feel their way into each others' playing.

The first piece on this 34 minute CD, *Fairy Dance*, is much shorter than the other two. Echoing guitar notes and chirruping soprano give way to longer lines and unison repetition and sax overblowing. The guitar may be prepared in some way though nothing is mentioned in the sleeve notes. Fitz-Gerald's tone is metallic and

glassy and Coxhill provides continuity before a further unison passage with guitar more to the fore. The piece ends in a squall of faded feedback.

Echoes of Duneden once again features explorations of repeated phrases on soprano and guitar before a dancing figure from Coxhill and a dialogue that is almost a passage of counterpoint with both players using repetition as a prompt to each other. One loses count over the years of the various groupings, permutations and types of music which Coxhill has involved himself in but this one is certainly productive. Coxhill weaves long lines over high end plucking and low end echoes which give the illusion of two guitars and produce a wide sound frequency. In a sequence where both musicians use echo the duo react intuitively to the complex signals emanating from each others' instrument. A busy soundscape made to sound effortless. Fitz-Gerald opens new sonic possibilities for the guitar, with broad backdrops and a wide panoply of music which stretches the canvas for Coxhill to work above or inside. After a sequence of harmonics the piece ends with gentle plucking and a Coxhill melody including bent and slurred notes.

Elfin Tree commences with plucked clarity from guitar with a meandering sax line. Fitz-Gerald displays an excellent grasp of dynamics and there are echoes of jazz guitar runs and chords. Coxhill plays long lines interspersed with low end honks before a reflective solo over chorded swells from Fitz-Gerald and another section of quick unison repeated phrases. A loud section where Coxhill uses echo as Fitz-Gerald provides 'industrial' backing leads into a slightly Celtic feel from Coxhill over swelling chords and a jet plane ending!

This is a very welcome and absorbing CD containing a wealth of music from a sadly under-recorded pairing. Fitz-Gerald's playing is very advanced for the time of recording and almost certainly more influential than it was ever given credit for. A new recording of Fitz-Gerald would be very interesting and it would be fascinating to hear this duo again 30 odd years on. Anyone interested in Lol Coxhill's disparate and excellent musical activities should start with the Spectral Soprano CD on Martin Davidson's excellent Emanem label, or check his work on Ogun Records. Just branch out from there! (*Nick Dart*)

## **HUGH HOPPER – *HOPPER TUNITY BOX***

**Label:** Cuneiform Records

**Release date:** 2007

**Tracklist:** Hopper Tunity Box; Miniluv; Gnat Prong; The Lonely Sea and The Sky; Crumble; Lonely Woman; Mobile Mobile; Spanish Knee; Oyster Perpetual

**Personnel:** Hugh Hopper: Bass; guitar; recorders; soprano sax; percussion with, Richard Brunton: guitar; Marc Charig: cornet, tenor horn; Elton Dean: alto sax, saxello; Nigel Morris: drums; Frank Roberts: electric piano; Dave Stewart: organ, piano, oscillators; Mike Travis: drums; Gary Windo: bass clarinet, saxes.

**Additional information:** Recorded May to July 1976 at Mobile Mobile. Originally released by Compendium Records of Norway and produced by Mike Dunne and Hugh Hopper.

This recording would be considered by many as coming from the golden age of British jazz/rock when such bands as Nucleus, Hatfield & The North, Isotope, Away and of course Soft Machine produced excellent records of a decidedly non-American variety of the genre and played concerts to receptive rock audiences. Hugh, of course, was the bass guitarist in Soft Machine, providing monolithic bass riffs and strong compositions on the albums Two to Six. This CD reissue from 1977 actually reinforces what a large part Hugh played in the Soft Machine during his tenure in the band. This was his 2<sup>nd</sup> solo offering after 1984 which was released in 1973 and one of

the tracks on the former, *Miniluv*, also surfaces on the latter, albeit in radically different format.

The track Hopper Tunity Box has a bass riff which wouldn't be out of place on *Softs 4 or 5* which stays with you long after listening and as the title suggests also contains quotes from some of Hugh's tunes from the preceding years. The melody is played on multi-tracked recorders, giving an almost medieval feel to proceedings. Gary Windo's presence is very strong and the track segues into the aforementioned *Miniluv*, also heard on the 1984 album. Hugh's multi-tracked soprano sax is heard to great effect before Windo ends the piece.

Gnat Prong has a Hatfields feel, mainly due to the distinctive presence of the great Dave Stewart on keyboards and oscillators, a musician whose career should be re-evaluated; an excellent writer and on this evidence also interpreter of the music of others. The track moves through fast unison and slower atmospheric passages. The *Lonely Sea and The Sky* is the track which could most readily be associated with jazz. It could be covered by others as a standard and has a slow almost reverential ballad feel, with the brass of Elton Dean and Marc Charig used effectively but sparingly. *Crumble* has a jaunty jazz/funk feel, with the electric piano of Frank Roberts driving the riff and Richard Brunton's background funk guitar scratchings accentuating the funk. Excellent unison brass blowing on this piece too.

*Lonely Woman* is the only piece not written by Hugh, being the famous and much covered Ornette Coleman song and long one of Hugh's favourite pieces. Although the percussion is looped, the brass players treat the piece reverentially, until finally different instruments are used to restate bits of the theme. Superbly atmospheric – one can't help thinking that Ornette would love it!

*Mobile Mobile* is the sole track not featuring Mike Travis on drums. On this track drum duties are taken by Hugh's former Isotope colleague Nigel Morris who provides a shimmering percussive backdrop behind Hugh's bass on the initial slow section before powering Hugh and Dave Stewart through the quicker tempo section. *Spanish Knee* provides an excellent Elton Dean solo before the CD ends with *Oyster Perpetual* which features Hugh alone on overdubbed basses on a soundscape which would not have sounded out of place on 1984 but which ends this set on a cool chill out after all the previous activity.

It's interesting to read Hugh's notes on how the tracks were put together piece by piece. Interesting because the tracks sound like genuine back collaborations. As far as I know these tracks were not played on the road by a permanent band line up, which is a pity as the material deserves to be heard in a concert setting.

The CD has been superbly packaged by Cuneiform and can be unreservedly recommended to all followers of *Soft Machine* during Hugh's tenure as bassist. An excellent and very underrated recording. (*Nick Dart*)

## **MIKE OSBORNE – *FORCE OF NATURE***

**Label:** Reel Recordings

**Release date:** 2008

**Tracklist:** Ducking & Diving; Journey's End; All Night Long

**Personnel:** Mike 'Ossie' Osborne: alto saxophone; Dave Holdsworth: trumpet; Marcio Mattos: bass (on *Ducking & Diving*); Brian Abrahams: drums (on *Ducking & Diving*); Paul Bridge: bass (on other tracks); Tony Marsh: drums (on other tracks).

**Additional information:** *Ducking & Diving* recorded live October 1980 at Kolner Jazzhaus Festival, Koln; other tracks recorded live April 1981 in London.

This CD features live recordings of two different versions of the Mike Osborne Quartet, both including the trumpeter Dave Holdsworth, with differing rhythm sections; Marcio Mattos and Brian Abrahams on the track recorded in Germany and Paul Bridge and Tony Marsh on the London pieces.

Mike Osborne's playing was always emotionally powerful and exciting and his writing almost invariably showed this. From the 60s to the early 80s he was a fixture on the British and European scenes until his playing career was cruelly cut short by illness.

Perhaps the track which most will be familiar with on this set is All Night Long. It appears twice in the recording of his Willisau concert on the superb Ogun album also entitled All Night Long from 1976. But as opposed to the earlier recording where the theme is stated as part of two longer sets of pieces, in this instance it stands alone and kicks along at a fast pace with an excellent solo from Osborne and Tony Marsh accenting the rhythm as only he can, before a reflective mid section, a highly charged solo from Holdsworth, rhythmic exploration from Marsh and return to the theme. Superb!

Ducking and Diving runs the whole gamut of Mike Osborne's live oeuvre; brief theme statements in unison with the excellent and underated Dave Holdsworth's trumpet; fiery improvisations and solos, together with solos for Holdsworth, arco from Mattos and the underlying propulsion of Brian Abrahams' drums. The piece runs through changes in tempo (post bop speed to virtual stillness) and dynamics (full band steaming to a quiet Holdsworth solo over minimal bass from Mattos), and may also contain other separate Osborne themes, as separate titles used to routinely be segued into each other in a live context. The concentration required to produce a piece as long and strong as this is immense and the audience is carried through a musical story incorporating bouncing almost bluesy passages as well as quotes from such surprising tunes as The Conga and almost a mimicing of church bells ringing. The sheer scale of the music produced by this quartet in a live context is breathtaking and all of the elements are folded into a unified whole which doesn't fail to surprise on repeated listenings. The interplay between Osborne and Holdsworth reflects a pairing which was comfortable to both players and the respect for each other's playing is evident throughout. Osborne's alto is ceaselessly searching and inventive and the full range of both horns are given reign on the material. An exciting festival performance, as evinced by the crowd reaction, and a fine track to explore over time.

The London tracks are shorter than Ducking and Diving and as such tend towards a more structured performance element. Journey's End starts with a theme statement and Holdsworth's soaring trumpet over busy bass and drums before a questing Osborne solo, ably abetted, as ever, by Holdsworth. Paul Bridge is at the forefront before the re-entry of both horns, who play together more on the London tracks than on the Koln piece where either sat out for periods.

Mike Osborne's name is mentioned less often nowadays than other perhaps more 'fashionable' saxophonists and it's to be hoped that this CD goes some way to redressing the balance. A fine release from Reel Recordings. (*Nick Dart*)

## **SUN RA FEATURING PHAROAH SANDERS & BLACK HAROLD – *LE SUN RA ARKESTRA LIVE AT JUDSON HALL***

**Label:** Esp-Disk/ **Release date:** 2009

**Tracklist:** Cosmic Interpretation; The Other World; The Second Stop Is Jupiter; The Now Tomorrow; Discipline 9; Gods on a Safari; The World Shadow; Rocket Number 9; The Voive of Pan; Dawn Over Israel; Space Mates

**Personnel:** Sun Ra (Sonny Blount): piano, celeste; Pharoah Sanders: tenor saxophone; Black Harold (Harold Murray): flute, log drum; Al Evans: trumpet; Teddy Nance: trombone; Marshall Allen: alto saxophone; Pat Patrick: baritone saxophone; Alan Silva & Ronnie Boykins: bass; Cliff Jarvis & Jimmhi Johnson: drums; Art Jenkins: 'space voice'. All musicians probably also double on percussion.

**Additional information:** Recorded in concert at Judson Hall, New York on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1964 as part of the Jazz Composers Guild's *Four Days in December*. Tracks 1-5 previously unreleased.



Former Fletcher Henderson arranger Sun Ra has long been one of the most enigmatic and misunderstood figures in jazz and this historically important release certainly does nothing to dispel the myth. The music on this disc was recorded as part of the Jazz Composers Guild's first and important festival, a festival which included bands led by Cecil Taylor, Paul Bley, Bill Dixon and Archie Shepp, as well as Sun Ra. Listen and marvel that it was recorded 45 years ago! Ra's catalogue of recordings is colossal, many of the earliest being on his own El Saturn label. They are of varying quality but an early lesson in independence and self sufficiency. This recording comes from relatively near to the start of Ra's catalogue which didn't come to a close until the early 1990s and also features an early appearance from the tenor saxophonist Pharoah Sanders. Interestingly the stalwart Ra saxophonist John Gilmore does not appear as he takes a brief sabbatical.

This CD is nothing if not eclectic, ranging from free jazz scream ups via quiet, tinkling passages to vocalised chants concerning space and inter-planetary travel! Five of the tracks are previously unissued and two of these, *The Now Tomorrow* and *Discipline 9*, are outstanding. The former starts as a slow piano and flute duet. It is very stately and includes bowed bass. An instrument sounding like a middle eastern taragota also appears from the ensemble. Ra's piano interjections take the piece into a



more angular direction and the full range of the keyboard is used. Comparisons with Cecil Taylor are inevitable. The piece ends quietly before a piano introduction into Discipline 9. Imaginative brass scores (harking back to Henderson days) are underpinned by piano and Marshall Allen rises above the slow progression. A riff commences and the vocals come in – ‘We travel the spaceways from planet to planet’. The riff subsides to a walking bass and the hint of a funk progression. It’s maybe even the start of the spacerock / psychedelic future! It lopes along superbly and the horns re-enter before a quiet ending with flute to the fore. Even in 1964 this music was building on Ra’s previous output – quite astonishing and a pre-cursor to about 90 subsequent recordings!

The other three unreleased tracks are of much more variable quality and the longest, The Other World, contains a ten minute drum sequence which may have been excellent visually but is very boring to listen to. Rock drummers would be castigated for it! Brass wails at the start of the piece over the barrage of the two drummers, with Sanders screaming to the fore and Ra very active. Patrick interjections segue into a Sanders solo and Evans trumpet runs before the drum sequence..... Cosmic Interpretation is a short, quiet piano and celeste introduction over bowed bass whilst The Second Stop is Jupiter is possibly one of the earliest mentions of outer space in jazz! It also features fun vocals.

The previously issued tracks show a broad range of Ra’s writing and musical activity. Differing piano styles, brass fanfares, intense ensemble playing dropping to slow, contrasting, quiet bowed bass passages. Percussion moves from barrages to quiet, tinkling and bells and ranges from supporting to interactive roles. Rocket Number 9 sees Sanders to the fore and Dawn Over Israel slows down after the energy of the concert with quiet flute from Murray and piano. Murray’s flute vocalisations are astonishing in The Voice of Pan with Ra’s writing for flute and bass outstanding. The fact that this CD features unissued Ra pieces makes it important. Ra is misunderstood and his output is in need of appraisal. This release ought to be a springboard for that. Space is indeed the Place! (*Nick Dart*)

#### **PAM AND GARY WINDO – AVANT GARDENERS**



**Label:** Reel Recordings

**Release date:** 2008

**Tracklist:** We're On Our Way/Primal Stream (duo); Roarin'; Shepp Heard; Bass Space; Frank'n'Myrrh/Incensed (trio); Maiden Stone (quartet)

**Personnel:** Pam Windo: piano (all tracks); Gary Windo: tenor saxophone & bass clarinet (all tracks); Frank Perry: percussion (on trio tracks); Harry Miller: bass; Louis Moholo: drums (on quartet track)

**Additional information:** Duo and quartet tracks recorded live at Maidstone College of Art, autumn 1976 and trio tracks recorded Highgate, London February 1974.

This CD features three elements which have not been available to listeners through the years: Gary Windo playing in a fully improvised context; an appearance on CD by the former Ovary Lodge percussionist and sound sculptor Frank Perry; and the piano playing of Pam Windo. The excellent rhythm section of the late bassist Harry Miller and drummer Louis Moholo, the staple of so many Ogun recordings is also present on the final track.

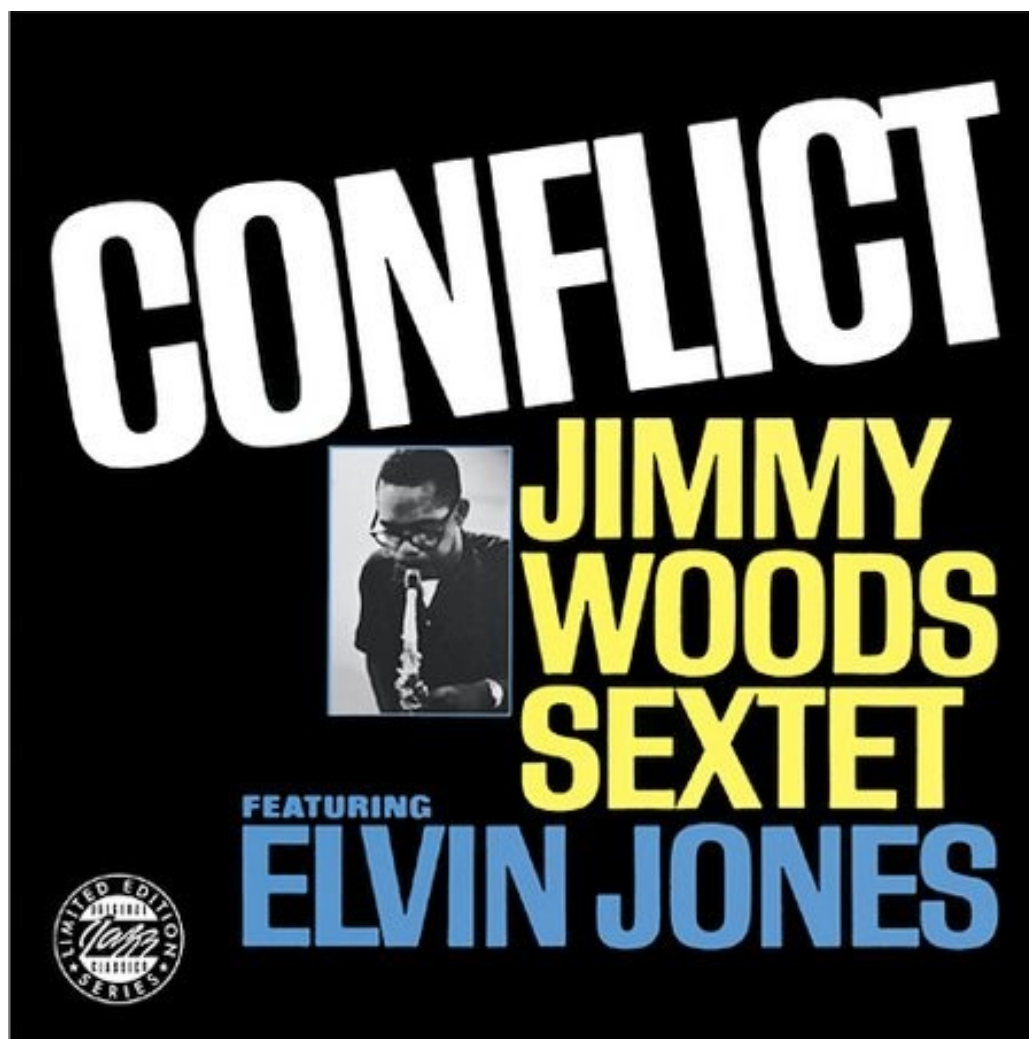
Even after a number of plays it is difficult to critique this CD. The recordings come from either one or two different concerts and what seems to be a private session and the different groupings produce results of differing quality though Pam and Gary Windo are present throughout. They also come from a very fertile period of time when musical exploration via improvisation was still excitedly moving forward from the early explorations of the likes of SME and AMM. Perhaps a clue to the music lies in some of the track titles, and indeed the CD title – is there a less reverant side to this music? Gary Windo's own piercing style is evident. His energy is infectious and a useful, though maybe obvious comparison on this CD is with the great Peter Brotzman.

Gary Windo is dominant on the duo tracks, with his shrieks and grunts verpowering Pam Windo's clusters, trills and runs in a manic free form duet which then moves into a quieter, reflective tenor over low key comping. The second part of the duo track, Primal Stream, is just that; a powerful, gruff determined solo from Gary Windo, short bursts with periods of silence before ending on longer statements.

The first of the trio pieces lives up to its title and shows Perry in uncharacteristically loud and rumbustious form, with tumbles of percussion and a whirler. Pounding piano in upper and lower registers is also heard before the raucous introduction of Gary Windo's bluff interjections over Perry's clatterings. The next trio piece starts quietly with Perry providing a shifting backdrop for elegant Gary Windo and sparse piano. This is the sort of playing more readily associated from Perry – cymbal splashes and subtlety. Bass Space, as the title suggests, is a bass clarinet solo for Gary Windo. The final trio track is the finest piece of music on the CD, the players seemingly having settled into the music. Perry's atmospheric introduction sets the piece up with bells, chains and cymbals before leading into big, crashing piano chords and Gary Windo screaming before high energy piano runs and even a false ending! The quartet piece with Miller and Moholo starts with a blues rhythm and is somewhat stilted. Gary Windo blows abstractedly over the top before the piece dissolves into a free form discussion. Moholo comes to the forefront and Miller adds arco interjections with flowing piano in evidence.

During this time period many improvisational gigs were played and this CD doesn't display any greater accomplishments than many others. It's a curate's egg – an excellent piece book-ended by more ordinary fare; an uneven record but one which reflects the questing spirit of the times. (*Nick Dart*)

# JIMMY WOODS SEXTET – *CONFLICT*



**Label:** Original Jazz Classics

**Release Date:** 2003

**Tracklist:** Conflict; Coming Home; Aim; Apart Together; Look to Your Heart; Pazmuerte

**Personnel:** Carmell Jones (trumpet) Jimmy Woods (alto sax) Harold Land (tenor sax) Andrew Hill (piano) George Tucker (bass) Elvin Jones (drums)

**Additional Information:** Recorded Los Angeles, CA, March 25 & 26, 1963

Notable as an early recording date for Andrew Hill and as one of the few instances of altoist Jimmy Woods' playing, this is one of those neglected albums that would seriously prick up people's ears if it was better known. Not only are the musicians all on fine form, but the whole thing has a subtle organic structure to it that moves beyond the simplicities of hard-bop blowing vehicles.

Although still alive and still, apparently, playing local gigs in Anchorage, Alaska, of all places, Woods pretty much disappeared off the scene after a small number of recordings in the early 60s. Having inherited his parents' real estate holdings, it sounds like he hasn't done too badly for himself, so at least his is not another one of those jazz musician tales of woe. But still, one can't help thinking what might have been if he'd kept on the scene – perhaps if he had moved into free music, as his playing, still primarily in a hard-bop bag, has something of the looseness of Jackie McLean's work from the same period. As it is, his two dates for Contemporary

Records, of which this is the second, are probably the best chance to hear what he could do, though he did record as a sideman with Dexter Gordon, among others.

Woods' tone on alto is at once smooth and piercing, swooping around on the fast be-bop runs that one might expect, but eliding and slurring them – or appearing to do so – in a way that gives them a much more unpredictable edge. Though not an all-star line-up, his band on this date is extremely good: Hill, about to kick-start his own series of recordings on Blue Note records, is first-class; trumpeter Carmell Jones adds a certain hard bop swagger to proceedings; Harold Land is always good value, though he's admittedly somewhat overshadowed by Woods, and not as authoritative as he would be several years later with Bobby Hutcherson; George Tucker does what's required of him, even if he's not as distinctive a voice as, say, Richard Davis on Hill's recordings; and Jones brings bags of latent energy into every strike of his kit.

I think I actually prefer the alternate take of 'Conflict' to the released version – it's less straightforwardly hard-swinging, and works more subtly in its mixture of restraint and bursts of more strident playing, with Hill acting as something of an in-band conductor, to ensure that everything ebbs and flows nicely. Despite its title, then, the piece (on both takes) begins in jaunty fashion, with Hill's sprightly chords underlain by Jones' drums, which have a distinct spring in their step – indeed, it seems as if the whole band is skipping along on their toes, buoyed along by the music so that their feet barely have to touch the ground. Hill's backing seems about to be bringing a more solemn tone into Harold Land's opening solo, but soon returns to sparser and more jolly chords which suit Land's bebop turn and the bright declamations of trumpeter Carmell Jones. Jones momentarily ups the heat and one suspects a be-bop blowout might be about to ensure, but solos are kept fairly short on this date, and Hill's solo is more urbane. As if to compensate, Woods swoops in, loud, slurred, drunken runs as if he can barely keep in control of the bebop lines he clearly knows how to handle, firing up to high cries and repeated upper-register flurries. Jones' solo doesn't quite burst out as it could do, perhaps due to Hill, whose presence seems like something of a restraining influence, though not necessarily in a bad way – the track's concision is a nice thing, the soloist forced to make interesting statements in the little space they have. Hill prods the direction of the music, laying down well-placed chords, or, indeed, leaving spaces where one would expect him to play, while Jones is always ready to prod the band a little, to add a little extra heat.

The album's ballad feature, 'Look to Your Heart' finds Woods as the sole horn, and his treatment of the melody is soft and quiet and sweet, almost as if he's restraining himself for his solo feature. Hill and Jones, underneath, keep up that slightly jaunty pace that we heard on 'Conflict', as if they, too, are just waiting for Woods to take off. Reaching the end of the melody statement, Woods signals the transition with a sudden drop to a rephrased low, then up to some high cries. Hill drops out and Woods drops back a little, playing around, testing the waters; a repeated declamation brings Hill back in and the heat's back on, repeated high phrases building in passion. Hill's solo is already full of the kind of phrasing you hear on his classic early Blue Note dates, with something of an edge to it that suggests it could suddenly scamper out of control. Woods treats the melody with a certain yearning, there's something more than just sweet here – even a touch of desperation? – though the final little concluding touch is as lovely as any of Coltrane's final flurries.

'Pazmuerte' begins in more openly questing fashion, though the initial statement is followed by a relaxed and elegant Latin melody. Hill takes things at a nice clip for a short solo, with Carmell Jones' trumpet alternating between mute and open behind him. The repeated clip-clop of Hill's chords brings in Land, Jones

perhaps less urgent but the track by now transformed into a piece of energetic hard-bop. Woods picks up on the little sudden rise signalling the end of the trumpet solo and bursts in with some burning Latin, spending so long on his held notes that he almost threatens to break out of the chord structure and play free, dragging the rhythm section with him. Hill straightens his tie with a flourish, playing around the chords, with which he is clearly taken, hammering them home.

There's plenty more to listen out for – three tracks in between those I've described, and three alternate takes which give those which were released a run for their money. Really this disc deserves to be held alongside Hill's 'Black Fire' and any of those fine early 60s free(ish) hard-bop dates – if Woods had kept a higher profile, it probably would have. As it is, those who approach it as an obscure item in Hill or Elvin Jones' discographies should realise that it's much more than a curiosity item. Well worth tracking down while it's still available. (*David Grundy*)

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## GIG REVIEWS

- **THE CONVERGENCE QUARTET**

*Churchill College, Cambridge (May 2009)*

- **ORNETTE COLEMAN/ MASTER MUSICIANS OF JAJOUKA**

*Royal Festival Hall, London (June 2009)*

- **JAZZ A VIENNE 2009**

*Various Venues, Vienne, France (June/July 2009)*

### **THE CONVERGENCE QUARTET**

**Churchill College Recital Room, Cambridge, Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2009**

A co-operative, trans-Atlantic group whose previous visit to the UK resulted in a fine album (this tour also involved a recording session, so keep your eyes peeled for future developments), the Convergence Quartet boast a wealth of combined experience: Taylor Ho Bynum's immersion in the complex musical worlds of Anthony Braxton, Harris Eisenstadt's fine work as a leader, and Alexander Hawkins' and Dominic Lash's involvement in the UK improv scene. As might be expected then, they played a fascinatingly varied programme, but there was also a real sense of a group identity – perhaps cemented by the fact that this gig came towards the end of a week spent touring the UK.

The concert began with Lash and his woody, twangy 'improv bass', Eisenstadt inquisitively testing the waters alongside. A few minutes in, and Bynum began to play a muted and moody melody with the softest of touches, continually cycling back to the original theme as the piece developed, rather in the manner of Miles Davis' 'Nefertiti'; it certainly gave an unusual structure which would prove to be typical of the group's atypical ability to create something diverse but not perversely scatter-brained, to balance composition and improvisation, to create new configurations and patterns afresh, at will.

Formal experimentation was perhaps most notably attempted about half-way through, with a performance of Dom Lash's piece 'Representations', in what was announced as its 15<sup>th</sup> configuration (previous performances have included a rather fine one at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music festival, available as a free download on Lash's Last FM page). While its restraints (involving much page-shuffling and stern

concentration, and afterwards described by Hawkins as akin to Russian roulette!) could potentially have zapped some of the spark from the group, on this occasion they provoked a degree of interaction that was quite different from the improvisations on the composed pieces, but no less fascinating. Hand signals led to transitions between sections or signalled duets, trios, and whole group configurations, different musical events occurring on different planes – thus, a series of vaguely Messiaen-like chords carried on underneath several other switches from the rest of the group (though this never felt like a changing *background*, an accompaniment to the piano). All this resulted in a kind of textural overlapping which meant that the piece, which might otherwise have seemed rather austere and episodic, instead seemed purposeful and knife-edged poised. It was fascinating indeed to watch musical minds at this level of concentration, to see if the risks taken paid off.

A Leroy Jenkins piece dedicated to Albert Ayler emerged in heartfelt quiet, cornet and trumpet delicate with their unison melody. The band certainly have an ear for not often-heard compositions: it's nice to hear this legacy of the underrated jazz masters getting its due, rather than endless re-hashings of 1930s popular songs and jazz standards. And they proved this once again by performing Tony Oxley's 'Crossings', which juxtaposed full-throttle free jazz squall, full-band cluster climaxes, bowed drone tones, and a pretty melody whose appeal was illustrated when Bynum spontaneously whistled along to Hawkins' rendition.

There was much to notice about the individual players. Bynum plays his cornet *loud* (those high, brash tones!) and with some style too – by which I mean to suggest, not that he demonstrates a polished virtuosity (though virtuosity it is), but rather, that his playing locates him in the great tradition of 'bad-taste' jazz trumpet, with cartoon parps (which, perhaps not entirely due to coincidence, require a lip position which gives him the temporary appearance of Donald Duck) and 'distortion' through the use of an 'on-off' mute effect. Indeed, he has rather a lot of these tricks up his sleeve – including pouring water down the mouth of his flugelhorn, which gushed out in irregular spasms as he played (though it didn't really seem to effect the sound of the instrument), and using a 'jazz hat' as a mute. But they never really felt like 'tricks' – sure, he does them because he can (and what's wrong with a bit of showmanship?) but he also does them because they make musical sense, and they never distract from the overall direction of the particular piece in which they are employed. This was best demonstrated towards the end of a piece where Bynum circularly breathed to sustain a one-note drone. Many players, I'm sure, would have employed it to generate applause in their solo (nothing like that sort of display to get listeners excited) but – proof that Bynum didn't want to be the flashy focus – it ended up being probably the quietest element in the texture, occasionally rising in volume to create odd harmonisings with the bass as things were dominated by sprightly piano.

Hawkins seems to get better every time I see him live; every solo he took tonight was a journey, or, if you prefer, a well-told short story. They would begin as jazz explorations, or even boogie-woogie-flavoured romps, before whipping themselves up to a frenzy of clanging clusters, rolling glissandi, and fast-paced, dissonant runs, like a dancer tripping over their feet as the speed of their performance spins out of control. This was both tremendously exciting and the consequence of a logical development – jazz taken to the edge and then pushed over, because there really was no where else to go – and it was always – somehow – contained within the framework of a two or three minute showcase.

The afore-mentioned 'Representations' demonstrated Lash's skills as a composer, an organiser of sounds, and he proved equally capable slotting in with



Eisenstadt to provide tight grooves on the jazzier numbers, though the most notable moments in his performance were when he made full use of his instrument's range, bowing behind the strings, teasing out harmonics, changing the whole texture of a piece with sensitive arco work.

Eisenstadt is not the most flashy drummer, but a vital part of the Quartet's musical identity: he has a tendency to go for the slightly off-kilter groove, loud, chunky, thumping beats and cymbal crashes just past the point you'd expect them to occur. He's a sensitive ballad player as well, mallets making cymbals sigh, barely there as the group trod more tender lines; and he proved his improv credentials in the freer passages, with moments of perfect quick-thinking, most notably when he followed two taps on the snare with two on cymbal, almost as if he was in dialogue with himself as well as with the other musicians. A small moment, easy to miss with all the other activity that was going on around it; there were probably many more of a similar kind which I failed to notice, indicating the music's real fullness and richness.

The audience was not particularly large, but clearly appreciative, and so the Quartet finished with an encore: a slice of South-African good humour via Dudu Pukwana. Bynum inserted a neatly-disguised 'Happy Birthday' quotation into his muted solo in honour of the pianist (incidentally, who knew that Mr Bynum was such a good SA jazz player?), and everything ended with a series of churchy and completely satisfying chords, bass and piano linking tones and the last reverberations of the piano's sustain pedal fading away with an effect that almost sounded electronic, merging with the short, satisfied sigh of a listener in the audience to perfectly satisfying effect. (*David Grundy*)

### **ORNETTE COLEMAN/ MASTER MUSICIANS OF JAJOUKA** ***Meltdown Festival – Royal Festival Hall, London, Sunday 21st June 2009***

A curious beast, the Meltdown Festival has been going for a couple of years now. Over a week-long period, a famous musician of some sort is invited to 'curate' a series of concerts taking place in the Southbank Centre; the purported aim is to encourage collaboration and experimentation, to bring in big-name draws but to encourage them to try out something a little different.

One suspects that being appointed 'curator' may have been something of a token gesture – a marketing opportunity, to reach out to a certain fan-base, more than an appointment made in order to further genuine artistic exploration. That said, legendary as he is in certain circles, Ornette Coleman is not necessarily the most marketable, or bankable, of artists, and the announcement of his curatorship this year raised hopes – or at least, more than the usual amount of curiosity. The presence of Moby and Yo La Tengo on the week-long bill was not a good sign, and there was something of a sense of opportunities missed – for instance, it might have been nice to have an evening dedicated to Ornette's large-scale compositions – 'Forms and Sounds for String Quartet', 'Skies of America', and the like – or to have brought in some of the European free players (who were shoehorned off into a single night: the trio of Evan Parker, Marc Ribot and Han Bennink) to generate some creative tension and to juxtapose quite different approaches, to emphasise how much Ornette's music was a move away from previous traditions and how it influenced new lineages, to bring the root into contact with some of its furthest-flung branches. Nonetheless, James Blood Ulmer, the Liberation Music Orchestra and The Roots (joined on this occasion by David Murray and by veteran saxophonist Andy Hamilton, in a tribute to Fela Kuti)

made up for the commercial concessions, and Ornette himself seemed to revel in the opportunities provided, appearing onstage most nights to jam with the various acts

As on most days, there were free performances clustered around the main event. The location for these, the Free Stage, could be found in front of an array of beanbags and trendy stools, tucked away in a little corner among the gleaming, light-filled spaces of the Festival Hall. On this particular occasion – the last day of the festival – it witnessed a lengthy improvisational experiment by a group led by Leafcutter John, in which the musicians responded to graphic-score-type cues, created from audience suggestions. It went on way too long, and the tendency of the ‘rhythm section’ to try and play like a jazz rhythm section meant that there were moments which got dangerously close to noodling and dull groove-riding; that said, the presence of a number of stringed instruments (electric violin, cello and bass) was a nice textural combination, perhaps shown off to best effect in a section entitled ‘Peking Opera’, and there was some extremely fine playing, on clarinet and saxophones, from Mr Shabaka Hutchings, a young player who’s been cropping up in various improvisational contexts recently, and who, on this showing, has some very interesting things to say on his instruments. Soaked in sweat at the end, the sheer effort he put into his performance even while others seemed to be coasting was exemplary, and his brief nudging of the music into bona-fide free-jazz territory provided the best moments of the performance.

The Master Musicians of Jajouka, who had been performing free shows around the Southbank Centre all week, and who had joined Ornette’s band on-stage for one number the previous Friday, performed a half-hour set. Divided equally between drummers and reed players, their music came out as blocks of rhythmic unison, leader Bachir Atta playing phrases which the other players closely followed, slight delays between each line giving the effect of a Reichian pulse movement. It did feel as though the music lost something from the context, and the awkward clap-along which ensued when one drummer took to the front of the stage and performed a semi-dance heightened this even more: this music feels like it was made either for more open, less formal public spaces, with room for dancing or squatting or standing, and the physical reaction it evinced was forcibly restrained by the western concert-hall setting.

This was music which settled on one idea and ran with it, with little variation besides the abrupt song-transitions, which Atta would signal by playing a new melody. The focus, then, is not western, progression-oriented forms, and something of this comes through in Ornette’s own playing, such as the lengthy improvisations on ‘Chappaqua Suite’, where the unfolding of ideas on a similar plane is not about building up to emotional climaxes, as the Coltrane-tradition of saxophone players in particular emphasise (though Coltrane himself tended to reach that peak of intensity and stay there, more than building up or building down), but about the constant stream of ideas within particular parameters which are open to change but which are not under the force of *having* to change.

The festival itself, with its proclaimed desire to mix artists and encourage new collaborations, risked being a ‘melting-pot’ in name only – collaborations that were occasional, polite, and something of a formality. But it actually worked here, as Ornette’s current band – a quartet with electric bassist Al McDowell (playing in the instrument’s high register and essentially filling the role of guitarist (rather too politely, it must be said – James Blood Ulmer, who also played the Festival, would surely have been the better choice)), acoustic bassist Tony Falanga, and Deonardo Coleman on drums – ran through their usual setlist with their customary brevity

(songs tend to run no more than five minutes), but then adapted to the presence of a number of guests.

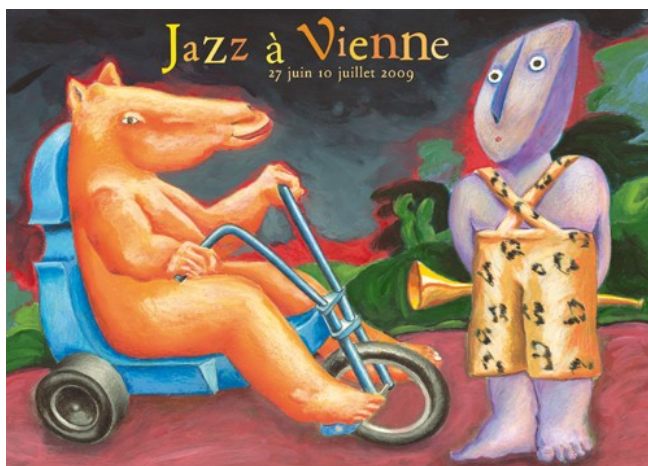
The first of these, Baaba Maal, strolled on stage for just one number, a ballad, and his powerful voice lifted up in counter-melodic ecstasy to Ornette's saxophone, though his contribution remained rather limited, as he seemed to be trying to work out how to fit into what was already a fine combination. Flea, best known as the bassist from the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, was the main advertised guest, and there was much speculation before hand as to how he was going to fit in, but he'd clearly learnt the music, fitting straight into a difficult unison melody and generally providing understanding melodic patterning to go alongside McDowell and Falanga (though the sound mix was at fault here, with the electric bass mixed up way too high, nearly drowning out McDowell and making a mockery of Ornette's core group philosophy, of a band all pursuing their own separate but complementary melodic strains).

After an hour or so, the Master Musicians once more took to the stage for a jam with the band, and, while at first the rhythm section seemed to find it a little hard to fit in, once Ornette started playing that became pretty much irrelevant, as his burning alto lifted over the two bands playing behind him, so that they became a wash of colour, a wall of sound, psychedelic indeed.

Applause was rapturous (perhaps a little too rapturous – as always at these occasions, it seems that the audience is willing to cheer anything to the rafters, including false starts), and the final number of the evening found Charlie Haden, lit mysteriously in shadow, joining Ornette and his son for a trio version of the inevitable 'Lonely Woman'. While one couldn't say that Ornette was exactly taking it easy through the rest of the concert, this seemed to be the most challenging context he'd found himself in so far, and it was a good chance to hear his improvisational thinking in a less cluttered context. Deonardo's rhythmic touch can be a little heavy-handed at times, and he seemed to realise this, sitting out for long periods as the two old men duetted. Ornette's playing was gleamingly melodic as ever, and Haden's resonant plucking of course hearkened back to 'The Shape of Jazz to Come' performance, but his tendency to go off into folky Americana melodic noodlings did seem to run contrary to Ornette's more carefully-shaped directions. That said, it was a nice way to cap off what was a fine evening: a fitting climax to a festival which, on this evidence, and according to reports from the performances which led up to it, seems to have transcended the hype which might have proved its downfall. *(David Grundy)*

### ***JAZZ A VIENNE 2009***

**Various Venues, 27<sup>th</sup> June – 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009**



Arriving on the evening of 29th June, I missed the main gig, a double bill by big bands led by Gil Evans' associate Laurent Cugny and the American Jason Lindner, the latter being particularly well-received by those I met who were at the concert. The festival therefore started for me with the wonderful Zozophonie Orchestra, who sounded like archaic country blues with slide guitar meeting Gerry Mulligan. The charismatic leader, guitarist and singer who went by the name of "Manouche" sang a range of standards such as "Trouble in mind" and "Stormy Weather" and their set remained one of the most memorable of the festival at the scene de Cybele. The following Fred Nardin/ Jon Boutellier quartet were pretty good too.

The first main concert in the Theatre Antique was given over totally to Martial Solal and, although only half full, the audience that had assembled was very partisan. However, the set opened with Solal's specially commissioned composition for six pianists with the Moutin Brothers playing bass and drums. The music consisted on written statements for the six keyboards interspersed with a solo feature for each musician, none of whom other than Solal seemed to have much identity, and the fragmentary nature of this work left everyone hoping that the following duet with the 91-year old Hank Jones would be better. Unfortunately, the Moutins seemed inappropriate for Jones' clear, concise improvised lines and Solal's angular interjections sat uncomfortably with the older musician's more orthodox approach. The repertoire included a host of hackneyed standards like "Tea for two" and "Blue Monk" and the failure of Solal to let Jones solo without interference created a muddle rather than a duet between two master musicians. After this, Solal's Dodectet took the stage with the strings from the Orchestre de L'Opera de Lyon in a programme of Solal's more classical flavoured work, which took its cues from Serialist composers, with a lack of either melody or thematic material, let alone swing, that eventually cleared the venue of those that had remained. Solal's daughter sang in a fashion not dissimilar to Norman Winstone. All in all, it was a pretty woeful experience and let me reluctant to go on to the club to listen to more music.

The following afternoon's concert by the Cine Classics Band featured a wealth of Disney and other film tunes before the evening's gig with Dave Sanborn and George Duke / Chaka Khan. Sanborn proved to be hugely effective and performed a set that paid homage to Ray Charles, Fathead Newman and Hank Crawford as well as old chestnuts such as "Basin Street Blues" and "St. Louis Blues" (in an adaptation of the Gil Evans score) and his band included several horns as well as Gene Lake's drums and Ricky Peterson's keyboards. After the previous evening's debacle, this was more in keeping with what jazz is about and, as a live experience, much removed from his studio work. Ditto George Duke's trio, which truly burned behind singer Chaka Khan, who proved far more adept at jazz than you would have appreciated, even if she had a tendency to reach for the higher ranges from time to time. There was clearly a great deal of chemistry between Duke and the flirtatious Khan and their set was thoroughly enjoyable. However, the highlight of the evening was Duke's performance of a stomping blues that was so good you didn't want it to stop. Earlier in the day, the French soul group "Laome" had entertained the crowds on the Cybele stage with their collection of three talented singers and infectious grooves. The day for me concluded with drummer Anne Paceo's trio who included a piano and bass in the line up. This music was much too similar to Brad Mehldau's trio and it was difficult to retain interest after a handful of numbers.

The third day at the festival saw the Garfield High School Jazz Band take the stage in a programme of Ellington material but a sudden and violent rain storm meant

that this excellent big band had to leave the stage and all subsequent concerts were cancelled. This didn't bode well for the concert at the main venue where Roy Hargrove was to lead his big band for the first half and then return with his Funk / Rap outfit "RH Factor" for the second. The weather cleared up and Hargrove led his orchestra through a brilliant set that recalled recent bands such as Charles Tolliver's, but was not averse to tipping their hat to earlier swing bands and Dizzy Gillespie's wonderful group. Wearing a light grey suit, a pair of red and white Nike trainers and matching bow tie and a trilby, Hargrove seems to be reinventing himself as a jazz equivalent of Kanye West. The band played with brio and attitude. This was one of the festival highlights, especially when the fabulous jazz singer Roberta Gamabarini sang a couple of numbers. Almost as enjoyable was RH Factor although I wasn't quite as struck on the rapper MC Solaar as the brilliant girl singer who remained uncredited in all of the festival brochures.

The next day I caught the strange Plan B 4Tet in the scene de Cybele and found the line up of accordion, clarinet, double bass and drums playing a kind of reggae-fied klezmer music not to my taste. The Brazilian-themed evening was a total non-event, with the vocal group "Trio Esperanca" leaving no impression and the following Gilberto Gil being nothing other than bland pop. The day was salvaged by catching guitarist Will Bernard's trio with organist Will Blades and drummer Simon Lott smoking in the Club de Minuit: this would have pleased all fans of the recent John Scofield / MMW collaborations. For me, this is exactly the kind of group that typifies the difference between American and European groups and is indicative of the manner in which the former have an ability to truly go for the throat with no holds barred swinging. Like many American musicians, they can take the music right outside but the groove is the main thing and this is never sacrificed. Everyone at this gig went home happy and I was pleased to meet up with the leader afterwards who informed me that this group will be touring the UK in August. I would wholly recommend their appearances. This was another highlight of the festival.

On Saturday, I caught the Turkish / Italian pianist Murat Ozturk playing a solo recital at the museum across the river in St. Romain-en-gal. His opening number sounded like one of the most tranquil episodes of Keith Jarrett's Koln Concert and an abstract interpretation of "Darn that dream" intrigued but his tendency for introspection – which even saw "C-Jam Blues" build up to an anticlimax – soon bored. Indeed, he made Tord Gustavesen sound like Jerry Lee Lewis in the manner in which he tried to avoid excitement. Despite the enthusiasm of one of the piano-teachers at the workshop, Ozturk seemed indicative of what I feel is a negative influence in jazz piano. I regret that I am not enthusiastic about the current style of piano playing.

By contrast, the evening in the Theatre Antique was dedicated to the blues and the evening opened up with the personable French harmonica player Jean-Jacques Milteau who bears an uncanny resemblance to Jack Hargreaves of "Out of town" fame. Agreeable as his set was, Joe Louis Walkers cranked things up to a higher level with a feisty set only to be followed by Lucky Peterson's group that saw the leader largely swap his guitar for a Hammond B3. He announced that it would be largely a jazz gig and, having worked the audience up with a rendition of "I can't stand the rain," there were little complaints from the audience. Peterson is a hugely engaging performer and a great entertainer. I thought that his set, which continued well in to the early hours of the morning, was brilliant and it was apparent that he was enjoying himself so much too that he didn't wish to leave earlier. The repertoire took on a whole host of favourites from soul numbers to Horace Silver and Robert Johnson.

If you want any proof of Blue Note's demise as a credible jazz label then their artist Raul Midon's opening set on Sunday was proof. Playing solo guitar and singing, this was folk-pop music and whilst obviously appealing to the audience, was a bit tame in my estimation. More to my liking was the group SMV which saw three bass guitar titans in the form of Stanley Clarke, Marcus Miller and Victor Wooten take to the stage accompanied by a keyboard player and drummer. On paper, this could have been a recipe for disaster, but the attention to writing served to ensure that this concert was musically rewarding and hugely entertaining. Miller was the star of the show and I suspect that it was his craftsmanship that ensured this was such a success. Homage was made to the late Michael Jackson with renditions of "Human nature" and "Beat it", demonstrating that his music is probably held in much higher esteem by musicians than the jazz audience. Victor Wooten's bass was a new experience for me and I thought that he was easily the equal of the other two. Jazz as entertainment, maybe, but who is complaining if the results are as good as this?

If anything, the Monday was even worse than the Brazilian night. The afternoon had been promising with the guitar-led group "Rencontre" but I missed most of singer Yael Naim's set dedicated to the music of Joni Mitchell, which featured the flugelhorn of Stephane Belmondo as I was playing with a group from one of the workshops. Her set was followed by that of the smarmy singer Seal who guaranteed the biggest audience of the festival and the wrath of the local paper "Le Dauphine" which described his music as "soul music without a soul." The difference between Seal's music and the jazz which made up most of the festival was immense and the lack of any real music in this gig warranted the wrath of the jazz purists. I didn't even think that he had that great a voice either – maybe this is something that has been fabricated in the studio. It was plastic music for people with cloth ears. Again, the day was rescued at the Club de Minuit where people looking for proper music could hear Nasheet Waits' "Equality," featuring Stanley Cowell, Tarus Mateen and Logan Richardson on alto. This pushed contemporary jazz to its boundaries with improvisations that frequently kicked away the bar lines and structure of the music in some of the fastest and most furious time / no changes jazz I have heard. Mateen and Waits are joined at the hip as a rhythm team and Cowell was immense at the piano, occasionally distorting the sound of the grand piano through his lap top. Logan Richardson is yet another name to look out for and his cool, acidic playing fitted perfectly in place with this wondrous music. Again, proof, if needed, that a gulf does still exist between jazz in Europe and the States. Personally, I didn't feel that the much-vaunted Martial Solal was in the same league as Stanley Cowell.

Poor weather again marred the free gigs in the Scene de Cybele. The Big Band de Savoie delivered a great set that included some music by Mingus but the abandoning of the Jazz School Studio band set by another American college band disappointed many fans like myself who find these groups to be of an exceptionally high standard. In the evening, singer Kevin Mahogany played the first half of the evening in a set that was clearly influenced by the repertoire from his home town of Kansas City. The coupling with singer Kathy Kosins proved an excellent foil and the band, billed as the "Godfathers of Groove" (Red Holloway on tenor, Grant Green Jr on guitar, Reuben Wilson on organ and Bernard "Pretty" Purdie on drums) were great. It was disappointing to see that they had no CDs of this line up on sale and their concert was particularly good. Fans of the music of Jimmy Rushing and Joe Williams would have been particularly pleased. A "big thumbs-up" is also due to Red Holloway, not a name heard too often but someone from an earlier generation of players who seemed to deliver some great solos with consummate ease that is missing



from many of today's jazz wannabees.

This set was followed by opera singer Barbara Hendricks' concert with the flat-pack, ready-to-assemble Magnus Lindgren quartet. Dressed in black, Hendricks sported a demeanour that suggested her evening of "singing the blues" would be serious affair. Unfortunately, she had no aptitude for jazz and failed to reign in the operatic tendencies so that the music was at once dreadful and unintentionally comic. The results were so shocking that it beggared belief. Luckily, Esperanza Spalding's quartet in the Club de Minuit then played until early into the morning that was so spell-binding that the earlier events were quickly forgotten. A fantastic bassist as well as singer, this was the most exciting gig of the whole festival and the rapturous applause that greeted her final number was totally deserved.

On the Wednesday, the Truro College Jazz band flew the flag for British jazz and continued to deliver a set of polished original arrangements that set them apart from their American counterparts and offered something completely different from a medium – sized big band. The warm response to their concert was wholly deserved – someone should get the word out in the UK just how good this band is.

Again, I missed the first half of the concert in the Theatre Antique due to the fact that I was struggling elsewhere in a band from the workshop, but the combination of Dianne Reeves, Lizz Wright, Angelique Kidjo and "Simone," in a tribute to the latter's mother, Nina, was explosive. Backed by Nina Simone's original band, all four singers were superb but Lizz Wright was exceptional. Dianne Reeves clearly demonstrated why she remains the greatest female singer on the current jazz scene whilst the Beneniose singer Angelique Kidjo added a more esoteric approach provided a welcome contrast. This was another brilliant evening. The night concluded with Blue Note recording artist pianist Aaron Parks' trio with Ben Street on bass and Ted Poor on drums. Still only 25 years old, the music initially seemed a little tame but the bass and drums helped kick the music along. Again, I could not help thinking about the similarity with Brad Mehldau's approach and whilst Parks does seem to be a slightly more rugged performer, you couldn't help thinking that there are plenty of other pianists out there in the world of jazz with a more robust approach to the music who are probably more deserving of the attention.

My final day at the festival saw me catching up with Herve Sellin's Tentet, fronted by the pianist and composer and including a five piece front line of horns plus vibes and rhythm. Whilst clearly influenced by Wynton Marsalis, Hellin served his apprenticeship with Johnny Griffin and led his group through a set that recalled the work for larger ensembles by Stan Tracey. This was about the only straight-ahead / hard bop group that played a Vienne this year and is perhaps indicative of the lessening hold on the music as a whole. Well written and executed and always swinging, I must feel that this band sounded like it had gate-crashed its own party.

Sellin's group was followed by the bi-annual visit of Wynton Marsalis and the LCJO. Perhaps the frequency of the visit accounted for the indifferent size of the audience or maybe they were hip to the fact that this band now seems increasingly irrelevant. The best moments were in Ted Nash's scores dedicated to painters Matisse and Jackson Pollock – the latter clearly written to sound like the Ornette Coleman group of the late fifties despite the fact that Pollock was actually a Trad fan. These scores were great but Marsalis' writing is, at best, indifferent – rather like sub-standard Ellington. A rendition of Fletcher Henderson's arrangement of Ravel's "Bolero" was ragged. The LCJO is an odd beast for there are repertory bands that play the older material far more effectively whereas the new compositions are nowhere as near as bold as those being written by the likes of Maria Schneider, Bob Brookeyer,

John Hollenbeck, Michael Mossman, etc that remain more representative of where jazz is as the second decade of the 21st Century approaches. As a consequence, this was a somewhat muted ending to the main theatre for me this year and I regret that the need to catch the early train the next day meant that I didn't catch all of the set by Baptiste Trotignon with Mark Turner, Jeremy Pelt and Eric Harland: what I caught of the first half sounded extremely good.

## LINKS

### Musicians' Websites

- Zozophonic Orchestra: [www.zozophonic.com](http://www.zozophonic.com)
- Murat Ozturk: [www.murat-ozturk.com](http://www.murat-ozturk.com)
- Will Barnard: [www.willbarnard.com](http://www.willbarnard.com)

### Youtube Footage of Performances from Festival Jazz à Vienne 2009

- George Duke Trio With Chaka Khan: Take the 'A' Train (Live, Festival Jazz à Vienne 2009): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8PCknkgkqE>
- Lucky Peterson: I Can't Stand the Rain (Live, Festival Jazz à Vienne 2009): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9h5DcFM7On4>
- Trio Esperança: Water of March (Live, Festival Jazz à Vienne 2009): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=od3uOQJ4uFk>
- Kevin Mahogany : Since I Fell For You (Live, Festival Jazz à Vienne 2009): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5ZpUZnkiHI>
- Esperanza Spaulding (Live, Festival Jazz à Vienne 2009): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKEI3b0U7i0>

*(Ian Thumwood)*

## List of Contributors

**Nick Dart** co-runs Hi4Head Records, which was founded in 2002 "to issue music of an enduring quality across a number of genres – music that deserves to be out there," and has released performances by Trevor Watts, John Stevens and others.

**David Grundy** is a recent graduate of Cambridge University, where he presented 'One Step Beyond', a jazz/experimental music radio show, for three years. He has also performed solo and with The Cambridge Free Improvisation Society.

**Sandy Kindness** is a member of I-C-E (the Improvising Clarinet Ensemble) and the trio Kindness/ May/ Lash (with percussionist Paul May and bassist Dominic Lash).

**Oscar Lomas** is a London-based saxophonist, flautist, bassoonist and bass clarinetist, whose past and present projects have included ArkLove, STEK and The Cambridge Free Improvisation Society.

**Ian Thumwood**, a keen football fan, birdwatcher and amateur pianist, has an extensive knowledge of the history and practice of jazz.

## Musicians Featured on ‘Second Journey’

**Dennis Bathory-Kitsz** is a composer, author, editor, teacher, and technologist. He is engaged in the advancement of arts and technology from both a humanist and experimental perspective. An independent composer with 970 compositions, more than 170 commissions and over 250 North American, European and Australian premiers and installations, his compositional styles range from cabaret and vaudeville through to experimental/ avant-garde, extended voice, multimedia, sound environment/ soundscape, performance art, and computer and tape works. His website is: <http://maltedmedia.com/people/bathory>.

**Peter Breslin** is a percussionist, pianist, composer and teacher who has performed extensively on the east coast and in the southwest. He studied drums with Andrew Cyrille in New York and piano with Shirley Ling in Philadelphia. In northern New Mexico, he has performed on piano in several large ensemble concerts of original composed and improvised music, as well as appeared on drums with a variety of groups. Currently, Breslin is an artist-in-residence with the Santa Fe Opera's Student Produced Opera Program, and writes on the arts for The Santa Fe Reporter. <http://peterbreslin.blogspot.com>.

**J.A. Deane** sometimes performs on trombone, but more often on synthesizers and live, real-time sampler. He appeared on the pioneering 1985 live recording of ‘Cobra’ by John Zorn. He has recorded with Jon Hassell, and has performed extensively with Butch Morris. Since 1997 he has led the Out of Context ensemble which further explores the language of conduction developed by Butch Morris. Out of Context has released CDs on the Zerx and High Mayhem record labels based out of Santa Fe, NM and continues to explore large ensemble improvisation.

**David Grundy** edits this magazine. Music-wise, he performs solo (various solo recordings can be found at <http://2009solos.multiply.com>) and with the Cambridge Free Improvisation Society (<http://cambridgeimprovisation.wordpress.com>).

**Lycanthrope Oboe (Jacken Waters)** is the solo project of Jacken Waters (who has performed as part of Desdemona Lives, Sleepwalk Something, and the Cambridge Free Improvisation Society, among others). The music tends to be centred around the use of layered, manipulated guitar, built up slowly (‘songs’ tend to last 10 to 20 minutes) using washes of sound, or a single riff used as a basis to improvise around. Jacken co-runs Petula records <http://petularecords.wordpress.com>

**Massimo Magee** is a multi-instrumentalist from Brisbane, Australia. He has had tracks featured on the freejazz.org sampler and participated in the Cadavre Esquis collaborative project associated with the site. Live, he has performed with Lee Noyes and Amos Manne. Recordings are regularly released on his blog, Array Music: <http://arraymusic.wordpress.com/>

**Lee Noyes**, who is based in Dunedin, New Zealand, can be found playing acoustic and electric guitars, drums, percussion, live sampling and electronics, live and on CD and download releases in collaboration with Barry Chabala, Massimo Magee, Phil Hargreaves and Bruno Duplant. More information can be found at his website: <http://myspace.com/leenoyes>.

**Stek** are Robert van Stekelenberg (piano), Tim Clark (double bass), Oscar Lomas (reeds) and Hubert Spall (reeds). Drawing on the innovations of Paul Bley, Evan Parker, Peter Brotzmann, Ornette Coleman and early solo Keith Jarrett, STEK are a free improvising group that investigate ways of affecting change in the freely improvised situation without determining pitches. 'Compositions' generally involve stipulations as to how the leadership is passed around, changing moods and sequences of combinations of instruments to create different musical environments. The musicians all live in London and play in other contexts, including jazz, blues, metal, contemporary classical and ambient.

**Parallax** are: Stian Omenås (trumpet, percussion), Are Lothe Kolbeinsen (guitar, prepared guitar) and Ulrik Ibsen Thorsrud (drums, percussion). This Norwegian trio plays attentive and playful improvised music with references as diverse as traditional jazz and Asian music, as well as abstract soundscapes. Rustling, crackling, stealthily winding and melodic, the music moves effortlessly from a mere whisper to intensely suggestive stretches of rhythmic improvising. The music has been compared to haiku poetry; atmospheric, immediate and surprising. <http://myspace.com/parallaximpro>

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